



# JFA Purple Orange

## **JFA Purple Orange Submission**

To the Senate Standing Committee on Education and  
Employment Inquiry on *Levels of access and attainment  
for students living with disability in the school system and  
the impact on students and families associated with  
inadequate levels of support*

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## **About the Submitter**

JFA Purple Orange is the social policy agency of the Julia Farr Association Inc. We are a non-government, social profit organisation that conducts research and engages in dialogue with people with lived experience of disability to develop policy and practice. Our work is anchored on the principles of Personhood and Citizenship.

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## 1. Summary

JFA Purple Orange is an independent, non-government organisation based in South Australia that fosters innovation, shares useful information and promotes policy and practice that support and improve the life chances of people living with disability. Our work includes initiatives and conversations that directly relate to the education experience of children living with disability, their families and supporters. It is from this perspective that commentary is provided to the Senate Standing Committee.

JFA Purple Orange's submission endorses the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the National Disability Strategy 2010-2020 and various government initiatives intended to support students living with disability in the education system. However, we note attempts to improve the education experience and outcomes for people living with disability to date have had limited impact.

Our submission highlights that people living with disability must have power, choice and control over their own lives, which is based upon a foundation established through education. Education is a fundamental human right, and we cannot deny people living with disability this life-defining experience. Any real and sustainable change must be built upon measures that positively build a person's capacity and maximise the goodness in a person life. In line with our expertise, this submission addresses the following terms of reference from the Inquiry:

- 1. current levels of access and attainment for students with disability in the school system, and the impact on students and families associated with inadequate levels of support;*
- 2. the social, economic and personal benefits of improving outcomes for students with disability at school and in further education and employment;*
- 3. what should be done to better support students with disability in our schools;*
- 4. the early education of children with disability; and*
- 5. any other related matters.*

## 2. Recommendations:

Based on the experiences of recent or current students living with disability and parents of school students living with disability, JFA Purple Orange makes the following recommendations:

- That the Australian Government resolve a new disability standard in education that “every student has the choice to attend their local, mainstream neighbourhood school and get a successful education”.<sup>1</sup>
- All new schools are designed with physical access in mind, so that they can be used by all students.
- Ensure all schools have access to resources to undertake necessary adaptations to the school environment, curriculum and other elements of school life, to ensure authentic participation of all students.
- That every student living with disability has a regularly reviewed individual education success plan that drives the measures referenced in the other recommendations in this paper, and which systematically builds the student, family and school's belief in the student's success and attainment.
- Ensure each individual education success plan includes an element that attends to building the student's genuine membership of the school community.
- Invest in creative ways of supporting young people living with disability such as youth mentoring, the Circles Initiative<sup>2</sup> and a reference committee of people living with disability who inform each state and territory's Education Department about supporting people living with disability to attain their education and extra-curricular goals.
- That school information and awareness for teachers be enhanced through consultation with expert organisations relating to the young person's specific disability.

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<sup>1</sup> Where ‘success’ is characterised by authentic inclusion across all areas of school life, and where the student has the best possible chance of transitioning to a productive adult life.

<sup>2</sup> See [www.clp-sa.org.au/content/circlesschool](http://www.clp-sa.org.au/content/circlesschool)

- Ensure teachers' core professional training, and continuing professional development, includes mandatory content on teaching to a diverse classroom.
- Ensure all school leadership appointments include a core competence criterion about a commitment to inclusion and diversity.
- Prioritise and encourage parent advocacy on behalf of the young person living with disability with awareness that parents are a vital source of information about the young person.

## **3. Introduction**

### **3.1. JFA Purple Orange**

JFA Purple Orange applauds the Australian Government's Senate Education and Employment Standing Committee for its commitment to improving the outcomes for students living with disability who are engaged with the school system, and appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission. JFA Purple Orange is the social policy agency of the Julia Farr group, a trio of social profit, non-government organisations based in South Australia, working to improve the life chances of people living with disability. We are an independent, non-government organisation that fosters innovation, shares useful information, and promotes policy and practice that support and improve the life chances of people living with disability.

JFA Purple Orange is not a service provider – we deliver research, evaluation and information services anchored upon the stories and experiences shared by people with a lived experience of disability and others in their lives. We regularly interact with parents about the experience of their children in the education system, and consult with Julia Farr Youth which has a long-standing interest in the experience of education for young people living with disability. Although we are not an education provider, we seek to amplify the voices of young people with a lived experience of disability. Consequently we are well placed to provide feedback about what needs to happen to improve the experience of students living with disability.

### **3.2. International and national contexts**

This submission commences with a contextual commentary in which we outline important international and national initiatives which establish a framework for addressing rights based issues such as the education of students living with disability.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities clearly stipulates that people living with disability have the right to education. Other international obligations, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the International Covenant on

Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, also protect the rights of children living with disability. Australia is obligated under each of these treaties.

### **3.3. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities <sup>3</sup>**

There is national recognition, through the ratification of the UNCRPD by Australia in July 2008, that all people living with disability have the right to education.

These rights are iterated in more detail throughout Article 24 as follows:

#### **3.4. Article 24 - Education**

1. States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education.

With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed to:

- a) The full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity;
- b) The development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential;
- c) Enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society.

#### **3.5. National Disability Strategy**

The National Disability Strategy 2010-2020<sup>4</sup> draws on the findings of the consultation with people living with disability conducted in 2008 by the National People with Disabilities and

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<sup>3</sup> United Nations Convention on the rights of people with disability. Accessed 11/8/15:  
<http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>



Carers Council. The report *Shut Out: The Experience of People with Disabilities and their Families in Australia*<sup>5</sup> summarised the situation for people living with disability in Australia as:

People with disabilities want to bring about a transformation of their lives. They want their human rights recognised and realised. They want the things that everyone else in the community takes for granted. They want somewhere to live, a job, better health care, a good education, a chance to enjoy the company of friends and family, to go to the footy and to go to the movies. They want the chance to participate meaningfully in the life of the community. And they are hopeful. They desire change and they want others in the community to share their vision. They recognise that governments cannot work in isolation and they want others to see the benefits of building from inclusive communities (*Shut Out*, 2009).

In response to these findings the Australian Government developed the National Disability Strategy in partnership with the Australian Local Government Association under the auspices of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). The Australian Local Government Association plays a pivotal role in its implementation. The shared vision is for an inclusive Australian society that enables people living with disability to fulfil their potential as equal citizens.

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<sup>4</sup> Commonwealth of Australia (2011) National disability Strategy 2010-2020. Accessed: 11/8/15: [https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05\\_2012/national\\_disability\\_strategy\\_2010\\_2020.pdf](https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05_2012/national_disability_strategy_2010_2020.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Commonwealth of Australia (2009) Shutout: the experience of people with disabilities and their families in Australia. Accessed 11.8.15: <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/disability-and-carers/publications-articles/policy-research/shut-out-the-experience-of-people-with-disabilities-and-their-families-in-australia>

### 3.6. The Disability Standards for Education (2005)

The Disability Standards for Education were introduced in 2005.<sup>6</sup> The standards reflect the Government's commitment to overcoming discrimination towards people living with disability. They were designed to promote the rights of students living with disability and to provide education providers with a clearer guide as to how they can meet their obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992. Further, the standards were intended to foster community awareness of the numerous barriers which people living with disability face when interacting with the education system. The standards were reviewed in 2010 with the purpose of determining whether they were sufficient in addressing the gaps in education for students living with disability.

Overall the review found that the Disability Standards for Education 2005<sup>7</sup> provide a good framework for promoting the requirement for students living with disability to be able to access and participate in education on the same basis as all other students. However, the effectiveness of the Standards has been undermined by problems with:

- how the Standards have been applied in practice
- the clarity of some key terms in the Standards
- interpretation of the Standards and adherence to requirements.

Participants in the review, including users and providers, provided feedback on a range of issues and themes including awareness and clarity of the Standards, access and participation, discrimination and inclusion, accountability and compliance, contemporary education contexts, and resources. The majority of the issues raised by stakeholders were

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<sup>6</sup>Disability Standards for Education (2005). Accessed 11.8.15: <https://education.gov.au/disability-standards-education>

<sup>7</sup> Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (2012) Report on the Review of Disability Standards for Education 2005. Accessed 11.8.15: <https://docs.education.gov.au/documents/2010-report-review-disability-standards-education-2005>

able to be addressed through awareness raising, amendments and additions to the Standard, and by providing further clarification on the Standards.

### **3.7. The More Support for Students with Disability initiative<sup>8</sup>**

This initiative was intended to strengthen the capacity of teachers and schools to better support students living with disability. During 2012-2014, more funding was directed to state and territory education authorities through a National Partnership. This initiative has now ceased. This program had a triple focus for equipping schools to better meet the needs of students living with disability, including training and development of teachers, assistive technology and equipment, and development of whole of school communities.

An independent national evaluation of the More Support for Students with Disabilities initiative has been undertaken by PhillipsKPA. It aimed to determine how effective the initiative was at helping to improve educational outcomes for students living with disability, increasing the capacity of teachers and fostering a more inclusive community in schools. The final evaluation report will be available in the latter half of 2015.

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<sup>8</sup> More Support for Students with Disabilities. Accessed: 11.8.15: <https://education.gov.au/more-support-students-disabilities>

## 4. Context of a good life

JFA Purple Orange believes that a good life for all people, including people living with disability is characterised by:

- authorship of our own lives (often described as control and choice)
- having valued roles in community life and economy (often described as inclusion).<sup>9</sup>

At JFA Purple Orange our work is guided by a model based on what we know about how people living with disability can achieve a good life. People living with disability want to be first and foremost regarded as citizens in their community, have access to relevant support in doing so, and make decisions based on their personal goals, wishes and needs. They want to undertake valued roles. The model developed by JFA Purple Orange provides a framework for conceptualising what a good life looks like for people living with disability. The *Model of Citizenship Support* (the Model) describes a good life as being characterised by valued roles (termed Citizenship) and by the decisions each person makes (termed Personhood).<sup>10</sup>

Unlike citizenship, Citizenship is a dynamic experience: it can rise and fall depending on the person's circumstances. The extent to which any person can naturally take up Personhood and Citizenship is influenced by the degree to which that person lives with vulnerability. For the purposes of this submission we define vulnerability as the presence of circumstances that can adversely impact on the person's capacity to build their own lives and the person's capacity to take up valued roles in community life and the economy.

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<sup>9</sup>Williams, R. (2013), *Model of Citizenship Support: 2nd edition*, Julia Farr Association Inc, Unley South Australia

<sup>10</sup> Williams, R. (2013), *Model of Citizenship Support: 2nd edition*, Julia Farr Association Inc, Unley South Australia

The Model refers to an intentional set of arrangements that authentically advance a person's life chances towards Citizenship, in keeping with each person's lifestyle choices, including education. The Model provides a comprehensive contextual framework for organising policy and practice in support of people living with disability. It asserts that our life chances comprise four different, but interrelated, types of assets we can call upon, termed the Four Capitals. These are: Personal Capital (how the person sees themselves), Knowledge Capital (what the person knows and can apply), Material Capital (money and the tangible things in our lives) and Social Capital (having people in our lives who we know and know us). These apply to any person and can help explain what might be helpful for someone to build a good life for themselves. It is worth noting that each of these types of assets are involved when a person is educated.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics summarises the importance of education to an individual's life chances:

A significant gap between students with disability and those without, notably in the attainment of Year 12 or equivalent, vocational education and training qualifications, and participation in university studies. Targeted support is needed to assist people who are disadvantaged in education and in the workforce, but mainstream education programs need to be designed for people of all abilities.<sup>11</sup>

Education is seen as a significant part of attaining a good life. Most people living with disability are determined to participate in education and should not be denied this opportunity to advance their life chances.

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<sup>11</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2009) Accessed 11.8.15  
<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4446.0Main%20Features102009?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=4446.0&issue=2009&num=&view=>

## 5. Our Approach to this Submission

JFA Purple Orange's submission to the Senate Education and Employment Reference Committee endorses the UNCRPW, the National Disability Strategy and the various Australian Government initiatives intended to better support the rights of students living with disability in education. We provide evidence below, based on two perspectives; the lived experiences of parents of students living with disability who are supporting them to participate in, and benefit from, education opportunities, and; young people living with disability who have left school in the last few years.

In preparing this response to the Senate Education and Employment Reference Committee telephone consultations were conducted with 12 parents of young people living with disability regarding their experience of the education system. Additionally, ten students living with disability who had recently left school, some of whom are currently attending University, shared details about their education experience at a focus group organised by JFA Purple Orange.

These interviews were recorded and transcribed. Direct de-identified quotes were drawn from transcriptions of these interviews. Of the young people living with disability 80 per cent had attended a mainstream public school. Some attended special units for certain subjects and others had a negotiated curriculum in a mainstream class. Approximately 20 per cent of parents had chosen a private school because they perceived that their child would receive more attention and support. Generally these parents reported more positive experiences of the education process. These parents reported that teachers were very willing to act on the advice of parents as to what would assist their child. Parents consider that it is very important that the school/principal/teachers be informed by the parent's knowledge of what works for their child.

A copy of the consultation questions can be found in Appendix A.

The key themes from the consultation are outlined below. In addition to those, participants raised other issues which, in the interest of brevity, we have listed in Appendix B.

## 6. Themes arising from the consultations

### 6.1. A single standard

Every child should have the choice to attend their local mainstream neighbourhood school and get a successful education, where success is characterised by authentic inclusion across all areas of school life, and where the student has the best possible chance of transitioning to a productive adult life.

All education should be based on the assumption that all children have the capacity to grow and learn and this will best happen in supportive inclusive neighbourhood schools. By having a separate system of specialised schools we are setting up a different path of expectation in the children who attend those schools, their families, and in the broader community.

### 6.2. Level of access

All schools should be accessible. Accessibility refers to how available something is to everyone. When something is accessible, everyone has the opportunity to use it or to participate in it. Accessibility happens when we discover and break down barriers and create opportunities for everyone to participate fully in their school and community.<sup>12</sup> People living with disability experience continual problems in accessing education. These range from difficulty accessing the curriculum to accessing the physical environment. Access is a crucial factor in the education system. At the very extreme it may mean a person is unable to access education because they are unable to negotiate the physical environment. One participant using a wheelchair for mobility explains how lack of access meant he had to leave the school:

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<sup>12</sup> [http://www.togetherwerock.com/sites/default/files/ToolKit\\_SamplePages\\_web.pdf](http://www.togetherwerock.com/sites/default/files/ToolKit_SamplePages_web.pdf)

*“They had classrooms free downstairs; they were not willing to move this class and it meant that I had to exit that school. I think they wanted to get me out of that school to not be a problem anymore ...”*

Another participant explains how the school’s policy obstructed him from accessing education:

*“They had a very strict thing; they were very selective of the students they took in. They were very strict that they wouldn’t take in any students with autism as well.”*

Further, a university student reports that she was not able to access exams due to the fact that they would not alter or remove the section that required diagrams to be drawn. She explains:

*“Things like requiring drawing diagrams. It’s not compulsory, there’s other ways to test. They don’t understand that. I guess I’m one that’s always in the office pushing for what I know is needed but even that’s not enough and not everyone has the energy and voice to be able to do that.”*

A person attending University and using a wheelchair described how barriers to access made life more difficult than it needed to be:

*“There are just a couple of simple things that I think could really help. Like with Disability Access Toilets there’s not one on every floor. So what you find is you have to go to other floors and that takes away the independence that you might have because you might need help to get through.”*

Remedies to these difficulties appear to be straightforward and clearly would have a significant positive impact on the young person’s experience of education.

Parent S describes her ongoing battle to access the school she wanted her daughter to go to (the same school as her other daughter attends). This included making a complaint to the Human Rights Commission. Parent S recalls:

*“Eventually, the Principal wrote to me to say that [daughter] couldn’t go to his school anymore because they couldn’t find support staff. So I said, ‘Well, we’re not going back.’ I made a complaint to the Human Rights Commission because the Principal*



*said his school wasn't a school for my daughter, when really it's a public school that anyone can go to – it's not his decision, it's my decision."*

Parent W similarly concluded that homeschooling would be better for her son than persisting at a government specialised school.

*"Eventually, things weren't working out at the school [son] was attending. He wasn't enjoying it at all, and lots of revolting things had happened. So we took him out of there and he was home schooled for about eight months while we negotiated with local high schools."*

When her son attempted to re-enter school his access was conditional and the school was very tentative. Parent W explains:

*"We spent that few months negotiating with just about everyone from the Education Department at some time, and writing letters, and they finally accepted [son] part-time—a very conditional acceptance."*

One participant commented he was asked if he felt a need to be part of a particular class. He explains his surprise at being asked:

*"... a lot of the time it's an assumption that you're not going to be involved with that [subject area], and that's a huge gap in the education system if you ask my opinion."*

### **6.3. Necessary support provided by the education system**

There should be a paradigm shift in the education system from the requirement to provide "reasonable" adjustments<sup>13</sup> to "necessary" adjustments. It is not enough for schools to say

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<sup>13</sup>Section 3.4 The Disability Standards for Education (2005). Accessed 11.8..15: <https://education.gov.au/disability-standards-education>

they had a reasonable go at responding to a student's needs but compliance would impose "unjustifiable hardship on the provider" which is currently the case in the standards. Schools should do whatever it takes to ensure a student can attend and participate fully in school life.

Therefore, if a student chooses their local school, that school principal should oversee whatever adjustments are necessary in that school - be they physical, technological, pedagogical, or social – to ensure the student is properly supported. School leaders, their education departments and governments can then be held accountable by measuring whether these adjustments took place or not.

The focus group reinforced the salience of adequate tailored support oriented toward the person's individual needs when at school. Quite simply, tailored support is the difference between being able to participate in education and being unable to participate in education.

*"I would say that my experience at school was overwhelmingly positive. Throughout school I had, in some classes, one-to-one support. Particularly more around senior school years where I'd have someone in the class with me more or less explaining questions because I tend to process things a bit different. Explaining questions that I might not fully understand and in some cases they would scribe for me if it was a timeframe or a test."*

Parent A explains the range of supports the school has put in place, both physical and attainment-related for her son:

*"... Almost all of his curriculum is adjusted in some way. The accommodations include physical settings. He has his wheelchair. He also gets out of his wheelchair and sits in his chair. He also does a lot of walking around as well. Physically it's accommodated. He doesn't sit on the floor because that's really painful with his AFOs. And then adjustments to the curriculum – he's still learning to count to 20. He's in grade 3. So we're talking pretty big gaps in relation to his peers."*

Significantly more young people reported that they did not receive tailored support and some had experienced situations where their family had to intervene. There was a general perception that teachers did not intuitively understand the implications of living with a disability. It was acknowledged that it may be difficult to acquire an understanding of the lived experience of disability. However, the absolute necessity of effective tailored support is emphasised. Participant L recalls:

*“He was in there as much as he could be, but the curriculum could’ve definitely have been modified better to suit him.”*

One student noted the importance of maintaining support hours on an ongoing and consistent basis:

*“They actually cut my SSO support hours, on the holidays. I was actually doing really well and I think that when you’re doing well it doesn’t mean that support can be cut back. It actually means that it’s working. So why take it away. I advocated with the school to get my hours back and the Department did do the right thing and I did get those hours back.”*

Other experiences suggested the level of support was either non-existent or contingent on the good will and presence of the Student Support Officer (SSO):

*“They didn’t put anything in place and weren’t willing to modify anything to allow me to go back [to school].”*

Parent L:

*“That very much depended upon whether the SSO was at school that day or not.”*

#### **6.4. Level of attainment: build expectations**

It is important to build expectations that children living with disability can get a good education at a mainstream school where, like other students, they are successfully prepared for a valued and productive adult life. Students and their families are often beset with messages from others about what is not possible, about having lower expectations because

of the circumstances of disability. This has to stop, especially when it comes from people involved in the education system. This happens through the development of an affirming individual planning approach that properly envisions the student's success in mainstream school settings, and is anchored on building the student and family's capacity to imagine and move towards this goal. Methodologies such as peer mentoring initiatives can help support this.

There is a strong belief in, and commitment to, the value of youth mentoring in supporting people living with disability. Many of the young people consulted for this submission are youth mentors. JFA Purple Orange has demonstrated the benefit of mentoring for young people living with disability.

*“Can we also include the Youth Mentoring. So yeah I think Peer Mentoring in the school and outside the school [is of benefit].”*

One young mentor who supported a young person to make the transition from primary to high school commented:

*“That was my mentor role initially. My mentee was about to make [the] transition from primary school to high school and I ended up having clearance to go into his new school. He had issues getting the school to actually take him because of his needs. He was needing to go to a completely different school than his peers, so needed to start again with friendship network and I was given clearance to go and sit with him in class and see how he was interacting in class.*

JFA Purple Orange conducts a peer mentoring project which involves young people providing support to other young people living with disability. A recent independent evaluation of the project found youth mentoring has had an overwhelmingly positive impact on participants' lives. Young people living with disability are being supported to take up leadership roles in their community, by supporting younger people living with disability to navigate transitions through adolescence and achieve their potential. A unique point of difference to this mentoring program, and an element perceived by participants as a key contributor to its success, is the lived experience of disability that Mentors bring to the role. With their lived experience and the associated ability to relate, understand and empathise,

Mentors provide Mentees with a level of support that is uniquely different from other relationships commonly held by young people living with disability. More information about the evaluation can be accessed in Appendix B.

Parent E describes her satisfaction with the level of [daughter's] attainment:

*"I think the important thing is she's in the class, doing it and listening to the other children who would be learning more complex sentences."*

### **6.5. Inclusion**

School communities need to develop habits of inclusion, so individual students living with disability are not routinely excluded because they are seen as different. Students living with some types of disability, for example those diagnosed as living on the autism spectrum, are at increased risk of exclusion, isolation and bullying, especially during the unstructured parts of the day such as recess and lunch. It is these circumstances that can lead to a family withdrawing a child from mainstream school and placing them in specialised school.

There are ways to reduce the chances a student is excluded by their non-disabled peers, including the Circles initiative. The Circles@School project is a trial funded by the SA Department of Education and Child Development (DECD), independently implemented by the Community Living Project Circles Initiative in conjunction with JFA Purple Orange. It aims to provide students living with disability attending mainstream schools and their parents with a network of support and belonging which will assist in strengthening their chances of a successful, inclusive education. It will also support participation in their school and local community.

One participant in the consultation spoke of the benefits of a Circle-type initiative:

*"But if you do start (circles) when you're 12 – 13 it can be beneficial in the longer sense because it can give you more skills and confidence and make you more determined to be at the school and not wag or confront the teachers, and if you've*

*got a network behind you, you know that these are the people that will support you when you're feeling targeted, stigmatised."*

More information about the circles concept can be accessed at [www.clp-sa.org.au/content/circlesschool](http://www.clp-sa.org.au/content/circlesschool)

Essentially, the goal of such an approach is to build a student's Social Capital<sup>14</sup> so they have a "posse", a group of non-disabled peers who know them, and can look out for them during these parts of the school day to make sure they are included. We believe if students feel a genuine part of the school community, they will do better in the classroom.

It is important there is an individual education success plan in place for each student living with disability, where there is an element that attends to building the student's genuine membership of the school community.

## **6.6. Training in disability for teachers**

Teachers in general need to feel more confident in their skills in teaching to a diverse classroom. There is good evidence of the value of this.<sup>15</sup>

Teachers' core professional training, and continuing professional development, needs to include mandatory content on teaching to a diverse classroom.

*"You can give support for teachers and I know they've got a hell of a job to do. It doesn't matter what school you're in you don't know what the students are going to*

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<sup>14</sup> Williams, R. (2013), *Model of Citizenship Support: 2nd edition*, Julia Farr Association Inc, Unley South Australia

<sup>15</sup> Haines, M., Jackson, R. and Williams, R., 2012. *Building Inclusive School Communities. A project report prepared by JFA Purple Orange for the Minister for Education and Child Development, South Australian Government. Confidential Draft*. JFA Purple Orange, Unley, South Australia. 168pp.

*be under your charge. You don't know what they're going to be like in terms of academic skills and personality and even behavior. But I just feel if we change how teachers see someone who has a disability and know how a person would actually behave then they might not need to worry."*

Parent M refers to her perception that teachers assume living with disability equates to reduced capacity of the person; rather than understanding that each person may require different strategies in order to learn. She explains:

*"The biggest difficulty I have encountered has been an apparent inability for some teachers to look beyond what's right in front of them and understand that with a little bit more time, encouragement and positive guidance, he will do well."*

The positive experiences expressed in the consultation came from the educator's attitude and perception. Parent E explains:

*"I think the teachers for the most part endeavour to bring out the best in her, and challenge her ... They don't underestimate her. I think what's important is the training of the teachers: that the teachers get the support that they need to be able to modify the curriculum to a whole range of abilities that they have in the classroom."*

Parent A expresses satisfaction with her son's teacher:

*"She's great, she's pretty damn awesome. And she gets really excited and lets him know about her excitement when he achieves something. So again it's just such a different experience for him."*

Almost without exception people living with disability and parents of young people living with disability who support them in education make repeated comments about the lack of understanding of particular disability and disability in general. Parents emphasised their child is not understood in terms of the lived experience of disability in the classroom. Tailored supports are not made available and their child frequently feels excluded. Children living with disability feel different from their peers and this is compounded by a teacher who

treats them differently or insensitively. Parents repeatedly call for disability specific training, e.g. about the best ways to respond to a child living with particular disability in order for them to learn. Of the consultation participants, 95 per cent of parents suggested that teachers require training on disability so they are more aware of how to respond to a child living with disability generally and specifically.

Parent S believes teachers should be prepared to teach all abilities:

*“So we had meetings at the school before she started. I met the principal and one of the teachers. The teacher said to me, ‘I’m not a special education teacher and I don’t want to be. So I’m not sure how your daughter’s going to manage in my class.’ So I just said, ‘Well, she’s going to be coming in to the school’.”*

Parent E’s suggestion for teacher training about disability regards it as a necessary part of the teacher training:

*“I think it needs to come through the training of the teacher. So anybody who wants to become a teacher should have specific training in teaching children living with disability. So it’s just part of the course built in, so that they have some idea of children with different needs and have the support.”*

Parent L believes disability training should be a large component of the teaching degree given more and more children the classroom live with disability.

*“It should have a core part of it, because we’re going to integration, because there’s going to be more and more and more children with disabilities in the classroom it has to be a high percentage of the component of the teaching degree.”*

## **6.7. Educational leadership**

School leaders need to be values-driven and genuinely committed to every child being welcome at their school. This requires work.



School leaders must work diligently to develop and impart a clear vision of what an inclusive classroom looks like and how it functions. They must give significant attention to providing the kinds of ongoing staff development that expands the capacity of both regular and special education teachers to serve students living with varied disability in a mainstream setting.<sup>16</sup>

Resources must be provided, including time for collaborative planning, support personnel that might be necessary, materials and assistive technologies. Finally, school leaders must be mindful of the changing concerns their staff, parents, and others have as greater inclusion begins to be implemented. By attending to these issues, a more inclusive educational system is possible.

SEDL, an affiliate of American Institutes for Research recommends school leaders must attend to six areas:

- developing and articulating a clear, shared vision of the change
- planning and providing for necessary resources
- identifying and providing staff development and training to develop the skills needed to support and carry out the change
- monitoring and evaluating (including monitoring of evolving personnel concerns about the change through the implementation process)
- providing ongoing consulting, coaching and staff development to further enhance staff capacity to accomplish the goals of the targeted change
- working to create a school context that supports change.

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<sup>16</sup>SEDL, an affiliate of American Institutes for Research  
[http://www.sedl.org/change/issues/issues43/what\\_to\\_do.html](http://www.sedl.org/change/issues/issues43/what_to_do.html)

Parent E emphasised the importance an inclusive culture in making the decision of where their child will be schooled:

*“I think it’s been fundamental to [daughter’s] educational experience. But the reason that we chose the school, when we spoke to the Principal they said it would be a privilege for us to have her daughter at this school, and he said that the other children will learn as much from her daughter as she will from them. Which I think is a really important thing.”*

Parent A is also satisfied with the inclusivity of her son’s school but sees room for greater acceptance of the child’s capacity:

*“I think she [the Principal] does have a commitment to inclusivity and that flows down. I think that the school’s ethics in and around inclusivity are not just around disability. They still need some massaging around knowing that it’s ok for a kid not to measure up to standards.”*

One family noted the difference in their son who moved from a specialised school to a mainstream Government High School. He now had a future with the prospect of employment:

*“It was really important for [son] to get into mainstream education because there was no way he was ever going to get anywhere in segregated settings. He would have gone to a segregated high school or he would have stayed at this other school until he was 18, 19, 20—which would have led to a sheltered workshop, or business services (whatever they’re called these days) and we could see that his life would never improve and opportunities would pass him by.”*

### **6.8. The impact of parent advocacy**

The findings of this consultation emphasise the importance of parents having the capacity to advocate for their child. This consultation indicated that young people living with disability

who had strong parent advocates achieved better outcomes socially and educationally. This points to the importance of parents having the skills and confidence to negotiate the features of their child's education with the school. JFA Purple Orange recognises parents know and understand the child's disability better than anyone else. As parents, they are the strongest advocate for their child's needs. Consequently, it is critical to have early meetings between family, teachers and people who have the best interests of the child in mind about what they will need to learn.

An example of the strength of this response is demonstrated by Parent L who believes her son would have fallen through the gaps had she not advocated for his needs.

*"Yep, most definitely if I hadn't been able to advocate for him he would've been lost to the system. He would've fallen through the cracks and he would be a mess I think."*

Five parents emphasised the importance of the family meeting with the school at the outset to talk about how the school can best support the child's educational experience. Parent E explains:

*"From the beginning we said ok we are going to meet, so let's get everyone around the table, so how often are we going to meet and what's the point of meeting, and what's it going to look like in terms of our daughter's educational experience."*

## 7. Conclusion

Every student is entitled to an education regardless of disability and need for additional support. It is a fundamental right. There are programs and services across each state and territory in mainstream and specialised schools that are aimed to provide tailored support. Parents or significant others can play a critical role in the work of discussing and planning for the child's needs while at school. This form of communication is essential when the student lives with disability.

From a human rights perspective, Australia is unable to deny the support that students living with disability require in order to undertake education. From an economic perspective Australia cannot afford to have people living with disability dependent on welfare benefits because they cannot access employment due to inadequate education. From a social perspective Australia is richer for the diversity of people living with disability in education and then employment.

What these participants told us is that successful interaction with their education depends on the person's ability to overcome hurdles. People living with disability are not provided with tailored support to meet their educational goals. Outcomes rely on the interest of particular teachers to assist the student and this is not satisfactory. Teachers lack an understanding of what a student living with disability needs to learn effectively.

JFA Purple Orange applauds the government for the intention behind this inquiry and therefore submits this response to the Senate inquiry to amplify and prioritise the voice of people living with disability in the issues that affect their lives.

## 8. Recommendations

On the basis of the experiences of students living with disability and parents of young people experiencing education, JFA Purple Orange makes the following recommendations:

- That the Australian Government resolve a new disability standard in education that “every student has the choice to attend their local, mainstream neighbourhood school and get a successful education”.<sup>17</sup>
- All new schools are designed with physical access in mind, so that they can be used by all students.
- Ensure all schools have access to resources to undertake necessary adaptations to the school environment, curriculum and other elements of school life, to ensure authentic participation of all students.
- That every student living with disability has a regularly reviewed individual education success plan that drives the measures referenced in the other recommendations in this paper, and which systematically builds the student, family and school's belief in the student's success and attainment.
- Ensure each individual education success plan includes an element that attends to building the student's genuine membership of the school community.
- Invest in creative ways of supporting young people living with disability such as youth mentoring, the Circles Initiative and a reference committee of people living with disability who inform each state and territory's Education Department about supporting people living with disability to attain their education and extra-curricular goals.
- That school information and awareness for teachers be enhanced through consultation with expert organisations relating to the young person's specific disability.

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<sup>17</sup> Where ‘success’ is characterised by authentic inclusion across all areas of school life, and where the student has the best possible chance of transitioning to a productive adult life.

- Ensure teachers' core professional training, and continuing professional development, includes mandatory content on teaching to a diverse classroom.
- Ensure all school leadership appointments include a core competence criterion about a commitment to inclusion and diversity.
- Prioritise and encourage parent advocacy on behalf of the young person living with disability with awareness that parents are a vital source of information about the young person.

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## 9. Appendix A - Education survey

1. How do you identify yourself within the context of this research?
  - recent school leaver
  - student
  - parent of child/children attending school
  - parent of child/children not attending school
  
2. What type of schooling were/are you involved with?
  - government school (mainstream)
  - specialist unit in a mainstream school
  - non-government school (mainstream)
  - specialist unit in a non-government mainstream school
  - specialist disability school
  - other
  
3. Is your child able to access an adequate level of education? Or are/were you able to access an adequate level of education? Please provide details.
4. Is the school environment accessible to your child? Or is/was school environment accessible to you? Please provide details.
5. Do you feel that efforts are made by the school to include your child in the education process? Or do you feel that the school makes an effort to be inclusive of you? Please provide details.
6. Do you feel your child is supported on a daily basis at school? Or are/were you supported on a daily basis at school? Please provide details.
7. Can you identify required support that you are not / did not receive?
8. Is there any specific feedback you consider important to provide to the government about levels of support provided by the school? Please provide details.
9. Do you have any further comments?

## 10. Appendix B – Additional issues arising from the survey

### 10.1. School support

Participants acknowledged that it was a difficult task to be responsive to individual student's needs each day.

*There needs to be a plan written up.*

*An access plan in high school and primary school would be a lot better - knowing what needs are required. All teachers would have to follow it; that would help people's education so much.*

*They thought they were doing good but they weren't. They don't understand.*

*I wouldn't have been able to do it without my access plan; I have a lot of modifications put in place to make it possible for me to do things. .. I have my access plan modified at least once a semester to accommodate my changing needs.*

*I think they [teachers] just need to realize that everyone is an individual. There's no protocol or stereotype of what support someone will need. They need to get to know the person and their needs and know what support the individual themselves want.*

*Modifications and specification of access plans should be done in house; it should be done with someone else to help to organize and initiate what resources you need to have a much more fulfilling and positive experience at school.*

*It's not a 'feel good' hand up to help you, it's a leveler.*

*It's about knowing how you can articulate the student's needs, and why they need to have these resources to really achieve the learning objectives of the course. They are not doing it to get preferential treatment. They [students living with disability] are doing it so they can be in the same learning level as the other students in the lectures.*

*Sometimes I think [lecturers] just go for the easy option out rather than having the course coordinators make the topic more accessible.*



## 10.2. Chronic illness

Some young people lived with chronic conditions that fluctuated over time. They expressed difficulties in teachers seemingly unaware of their ups and downs.

*I sort of just faded away. I got sick; I didn't really get a lot of support. Because I didn't look sick, it was assumed I was wagging and playing things up.*

*They suggested I try to do distance education. But it didn't really help. They give you a certain amount of time and if you feel shit at that time, you're not going to do it.*

*So I got sick at the start of high school. I spent about a year in hospital. When I got back to school, I was still pretty unwell but the school would not put any modifications in place so I didn't actually finish school.*

*[After being ill] I only went back for about 3 days over a few weeks and they just didn't do anything and we had a few discussions before me and my doctors just decided it wasn't suitable to go back. It was more stress.*

## 10.3. Feeling 'singled out' and bullied

Bullying at school was a repeated issue:

*Rarely [teacher] would say a good word about me but every time I did something wrong she would put me out there and make me a spectacle of the whole class.*

*I didn't have that much confidence to get out and be with people my own age. I used to always find places to hide, because I didn't want to talk to people. So I was an easy target for bullying from my peers and the teachers.*

*As soon as my condition became worse the bullying started.*

*Teasing occurred from some children "oh, you can't do Maths, you don't know what 1 + 1 is". The school clamped down on that quite quickly. They've also done some peer awareness about [daughter's disability].*

*My son stood out as an appropriate target to be bullied. He was the weak link and he copped it.*

*One boy made up a [negative] song about my son that was going around, and I only heard it because there was this delightful boy who my son became friends with, who told his mother. The teachers didn't tell me a thing.*

*[With a change of school] son's behaviour started changing and modifying. He started working out when it was okay to say "yes" and "no", and how to say "yes" and "no", and so I think he learned a lot of new skills. It was a very quick learning curve for him. And I think it was really important for us as a family.*

*My son had a very nice, but extremely weak teacher, who didn't seem to understand that by going with the majority, he was allowing the group mentality to dominate, and the bullies just got stronger. Nasty things were whispered to him, his lunch stolen, his books and other possessions thrown around the room, barriers put up to trip him or make it difficult for him to move around. He was continually under attack and none of the adults at the school noticed or were prepared to take action.*

*Home schooling became the solution. He was so traumatized that I didn't think it would be helpful trying to slot him into another school until high school. He needed some healing and confidence building, and needed to bring his schooling back to where it should be.*

#### **10.4. What helped?**

*The school was willing to actually meet with me and work out what it was that I needed to be part of that school, the same way as everybody else. They wanted to work as a team with me and my family which I wasn't really getting before, so that was good.*

*When I was at school in my final years, I went to an Education Centre. I got to work on my skills on job interviews, write up a resume, and get to know what it is you want to do in the workplace.*

*... if the teacher takes time to get to know the student, the class or the students will like them, and you engage better with the subject that's being taught.*

*At the time I didn't really identify myself as having a disability. I played sport. They were accommodating so I could join in with that. I had a shorter run up at cricket. As far as I was concerned I was like everybody else.*