



ACT Down Syndrome Association & Intellectual Disability
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ACT Public School System Resourcing Review Expert Panel
Email: SchoolsResourcingReview@act.gov.au

Dear Expert Panel

ACT Public School System Resourcing Review

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the ACT Public School System Resourcing Review.

About us

This is a joint submission from three organisations representing Canberrans with disabilities.

Advocacy for Inclusion (AFI) is an independent organisation delivering reputable national systemic advocacy informed by our experience in individual advocacy and community and government consultation. We provide dedicated individual and self-advocacy services, training, information and resources in the ACT. As a Disabled People's Organisation, the majority of our organisation, including our Board of Management, staff and members, are people with disabilities. AFI speaks with lived experience and is committed to advancing opportunities for the insights of people with disability to be heard and acknowledged.

Women with Disabilities ACT (WWDACT) is a systemic advocacy and peer support organisation dedicated to advancing the rights, safety, and inclusion of women, girls, and nonbinary individuals with disabilities in the ACT region. Established in 1995, WWDACT's work is underpinned by a human rights philosophy, aligning closely with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). WWDACT is unique in its intersectional approach to gender and disability advocacy, utilising co-design principles and lived experiences of members to influence policy and drive systemic change. We are proudly owned and operated by women* with disabilities, which gives an authentic voice resonating with the community we serve.

ACT Down Syndrome & Intellectual Disability (DSID) is committed to promoting and supporting inclusivity across the ACT and surrounding regions by ensuring the authentic voice of people with intellectual disability is heard and understood. We work actively within the community to assist in the removal of barriers for people with disability to access mainstream services and we aim to improve the quality of life for people with intellectual disability by providing support and information to families, carers, schools, employers and organisations.

AFI, WWDACT and DSID come together to create the *ACT Disability Directed Consumer Advocacy Caucus*. While we retain organisational distinctions, the caucus formalises our commitment to shared advocacy and representative work to the ACT Government on some key issues and matters of practice.

The need for an inclusive education system

Inclusive education is fundamental to enabling people with disability to participate socially and economically, live independently, and remain safe from violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation. Evidence consistently shows that inclusive settings produce stronger academic, social and emotional outcomes for students with disability, and create benefits for all learners through reduced bullying, improved acceptance and other social and academic gains. Inclusive education also supports better long-term outcomes, including employment, independent living and community participation.

Every day, we see both the promise and the limitations of the ACT's public education system. We strongly support the ACT Government's stated commitment to inclusive education. However, there remains a significant gap between policy intent and lived experience. Families, teachers and students report a system reaching crisis-point, with students continuing to face:

- inadequate staffing and specialist support,
- increased 're-set' days (informal suspensions) due to teaching staff not being able to manage children with co-occurring disability and behavioural concerns,
- inaccessible environments and learning materials,
- administrative and structural barriers that discourage attendance,
- inconsistent access to adjustments including integration into mainstream classes for students in small group programs, and
- an increasing drift toward segregated educational settings.

These issues reflect system-level resourcing failures and not the goodwill or effort of individual teachers. Addressing them is essential to meet obligations under the Disability Standards for Education 2005 and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Article 24). The Caucus urges the ACT Government to take this opportunity to fully resource an education system capable of delivering genuine inclusion, equitable learning, and safe participation for all students.

The case for increased resourcing and funding reform

The ACT's inclusive education strategy can only succeed if the system receives the investment required to deliver meaningful change and genuine inclusion. Across the Caucus, member organisations are reporting increased demand pressures and unmet need including:

- A rise in children being withdrawn or encouraged not to attend mainstream schools due to inadequate adjustments or support.
- Increased reliance on specialist schools and segregated small group programs, contrary to inclusive education goals.
- Significant administrative burdens on teachers, limiting time for individualised support.
- Delays or failures in accessing allied health, behaviour support and other adjustments, contributing to disengagement.

Schools are increasingly expected to coordinate access to external supports, evidence for adjustments, behaviour responses, and multidisciplinary collaboration. When these tasks fall to teachers or families without dedicated administrative resources, outcomes suffer leading to exclusion practices and segregation.

Below are two of many examples we are hearing across the ACT, illustrating how insufficient resourcing translates into exclusion in practice. Names and some details have been changed for privacy reasons.

Example: Rachel (Primary School) *

Rachel, who has intellectual disability and is neurodivergent, was moved into a Small Group Program on the promise of regular integration into mainstream classes, enabling her to receive more appropriate education and still participate in subjects such as drama, music and PE. In reality, staffing shortages mean she now spends every day in the segregated setting. Due to bullying, Rachel has been told she can no longer play on the main playground. She is excluded from excursions and assemblies because there is no support available to accompany her, and restricted to a separate area where boredom and isolation often lead to behaviours that are punished rather than understood. Rachel's teacher would like her to be reintegrated into mainstream classes but does not have the support staff to make this possible. Her parents feel misled; the school simply does not have the resources to deliver what was promised.

Example: Taylor and Susan (Early Primary School) *

Taylor and Susan have ASD and ADHD, and Susan also has an intellectual disability. Their parents provide a loving, stable home environment and ensure both siblings access a range of therapies outside school. Taylor is in a mainstream class, where teachers report he is often very disruptive. He is frequently sent home on informal "reset days" when the classroom becomes unmanageable—often just before excursions—effectively suspending him without documentation. The classroom environment is often messy and chaotic, and his teacher, despite best efforts, has no additional support. Susan spends most days in a Small Group Program with no integration into mainstream classes and no visible learning plan. Their parents report that both siblings' learning, wellbeing and social development are suffering, not because teachers don't care, but because schools lack adequate staffing, specialist input and time.

* Note: Names and some details changed for privacy reasons.

These examples illustrate common patterns across the ACT system: segregation driven by inadequate staffing and informal exclusions used as behaviour management.

Priority Areas for Investment

We ask that Panel consider the following seven funding recommendations:

1. Increase the disability loading for ACT public schools

A substantial increase to the loading for students with disability is needed to resource curriculum adaptation, specialist capability and meaningful adjustments. The current loading does not reflect actual need. Schools require predictable, adequate resources to deliver quality adjustments, and provide specialist capability to respond to complex behaviours.

2. Fund adequate numbers of Learning Support Assistants (LSAs)

Many classrooms do not have LSA coverage despite clear need. Increased investment is needed to ensure:

- every student requiring support receives consistent, skilled assistance,
- LSAs are trained in inclusive practice and positive behaviour support, and
- LSAs are available across all settings, not just high-needs clusters.

3. Expand staffing for administrative and coordination roles

To remove inappropriate burdens on teachers, the system requires dedicated administrative staff to coordinate adjustments, multidisciplinary collaboration, paperwork and evidence requirements, and communication with families.

4. Improve physical and digital accessibility across the school system

Additional funding is needed to improve physical and digital infrastructure in mainstream settings. Many schools have inaccessible classrooms, toilets, pathways, playgrounds digital materials, and sensory environments. Investment must support universal design, lighting and acoustics upgrades, digital accessibility, and safe movement through school spaces.

5. Improve access to allied health and specialist support

Additional resourcing is needed to address labour market supply issues in the ACT, to ensure access to occupational therapists, speech pathologists and other allied health professionals. Action is necessary to ensure specialist advice is available in mainstream schools, behaviour support is therapeutic, not punitive, and to avoid inappropriate reliance on families' NDIS plans.

6. Improve transparency and monitoring

The Caucus also calls for annual public reporting on funding for students with disability, progress in addressing unmet need, and delivery of the Inclusive Education Strategy. This reporting should include disaggregated data on enrolment, part-time attendance and exclusion patterns, LSA and specialist workforce capacity, and progress in delivering accessible infrastructure and adjustments.

7. Strengthen cross-system coordination and resourcing for intersecting needs

Finally, there are gaps and issues of poor coordination between the Education, NDIS, Health, Child and Youth Protection Services and community services systems. The Caucus asks that the Panel consider how funding across these systems can be better aligned. Consideration should also be given to how to direct resources to students with intersecting needs — including autistic students, students with intellectual disability, First Nations children, culturally and linguistically diverse families, and those with co-occurring mental health conditions — so schools can access timely specialist advice, culturally safe supports and clearer pathways.

The ACT Disability Caucus supports an ACT education system where every child can attend, participate and thrive on an equal basis. Achieving this aim requires structural investment, sustained resourcing, and system-wide capability. The above reforms will reduce exclusion, improve learning outcomes, and support the ACT to deliver on its legislative and human rights obligations. We welcome the opportunity to work with the ACT Government on shaping a school system that is genuinely inclusive, safe and equitable for all students.

Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute to this Review. We welcome the opportunity to work with the Panel through this Review to ensure the resourcing model supports genuine inclusion. Please contact me, at Craig@advocacyforinclusion.org, or our Senior Policy Officer, Harry Lomas, at Harry@advocacyforinclusion.org, if you wish to discuss this submission further.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Craig Wallace', written in a cursive style.

Craig Wallace (Head of Policy AFI; and)

Convenor, ACT Disability Directed Advocacy Caucus, on behalf of:

Nicolas Lawler, Chief Executive Officer, Advocacy for Inclusion,

Kat Reed, Chief Executive Officer, Women with Disabilities ACT,

Shannon Kolak, Chief Executive Officer, ACT Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disability.