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**New South Wales Auditor-General's Report**  
Performance Audit

**Supporting students with disability in NSW  
public schools**

Department of Education

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Our major responsibility is to conduct financial or 'attest' audits of State public sector agencies' financial statements. We also audit the Total State Sector Accounts, a consolidation of all agencies' accounts.

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In accordance with section 38E of the *Public Finance and Audit Act 1983*, I present a report titled **Supporting students with disability in NSW public schools: Department of Education**.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Margaret Crawford'.

**Margaret Crawford**  
Auditor-General  
12 May 2016

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# Executive summary

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The Department of Education (the Department) is responsible for supporting students with disability in New South Wales public schools. It estimates over 91,000, or around 12 per cent, need help with their learning due to disability. This may include physical or intellectual disability, or disorders affecting communication or mental health. Around 80 per cent of these students are enrolled in regular classes in public schools, with the remaining enrolled in specialist support classes.

The aim of this audit was to examine how well the Department is managing the transition to school for students with disability, and supporting teachers to improve these students' educational outcomes. By 'transition to school' we mean starting kindergarten or high school, or changing schools. To help us answer this, we asked whether the Department:

- identifies and meets the needs of students with disability when they start a new school?
- supports teachers to achieve their desired learning outcomes for students with disability?

## Conclusion

**Given the diverse needs of students with disability, the Department is doing a reasonable job in managing how well they transition to a new school and in supporting teachers to improve these students' educational outcomes. However, while some schools support students with disability well, others have more to do before they adequately meet students' needs. This is partly due to cultural resistance in schools, and the lack of expertise of some teachers, regarding disability.**

There are many processes in place to help teachers identify and meet the needs of students with disability when they transition to a new school. Teachers use a range of strategies to tailor support to each student, including adjusting how they teach the curriculum and the use of learning aids. However, schools should provide clearer information on the support available at their local school and consult more with families on what is being done to address the needs of their child.

In recent years, the Department has implemented a range of initiatives to help teachers support students with disability, including extra training and putting disability resources into schools. However, some teachers feel they are still not effectively supported, particularly teachers in regular classes who may be less experienced in teaching students with disability. Many want more help to manage student behavior and support students with autism and mental health issues. Teachers and parents also said the negative attitude of some teachers towards disability is a barrier to improving outcomes for these students.

## Major reforms introduced to support students with disability

In recent years, the Department has put considerable effort into improving support for students with disability. One of its key reforms, *Every Student, Every School*, introduced in 2012, aims to provide schools with the resources to support all students with additional learning needs. Initiatives include more teacher training, specialist learning and support teachers in schools, and increased disability funding for schools. Teachers must provide personalised support for students with disability by consulting parents, assessing students' learning needs, tailoring support, and monitoring its impact. In addition, school principals now have more discretionary funding to meet the individual learning needs of all students.

### Information on support in local schools should be clearer and easier to find

The Department has developed a lot of information to help parents and students with disability find out what support is available. Schools also hold orientation days where parents can meet the principal and staff who support students with disability. However, online information should be clearer and easier to find for families. Parents were also unclear about what support was available at their local school, for example, whether the school has the capability to support their child, and how it would tailor support to meet their child's needs.

### Schools have good processes for identifying learning needs

Schools have a range of good processes in place to identify the learning needs of students with disability. These include teachers gathering information during enrolment and orientation, and using various tools to assess a student's needs when he or she joins their class. However, there are barriers which may delay assessments, including schools not receiving timely information from the student's previous school or pre-school.

The Department has been streamlining the process to obtain access to a support class and funding to support high-needs students in regular classes. However, teachers and families advised that they still find this process time-consuming.

### Teachers tailor support for each student with disability but barriers remain

We found many examples of teachers adjusting support to meet the needs of individual students. These include adjusting the curriculum so it is more accessible to a student, or making changes to classroom practice. However, some barriers remain that prevent adjustments being made. These include limited time to plan for adjustments and poor understanding by some teachers of their obligations under disability standards for education and how to support a student with disability. Many families surveyed indicated they wanted greater consultation on what adjustments were being made for their child.

### The Department has improved teacher training and put additional support in schools

In recent years, the Department has put in place a range of initiatives to help teachers support students with disability. These include:

- training on disability covering various topics, including the disability standards
- 1,800 learning and support teachers in schools
- an increase in discretionary disability funding for schools.

The Department is also increasing the number of school counsellors in schools. Despite these initiatives, teachers want more help with the challenges associated with students with behavioural problems, mental health conditions, and autism.

### Teachers' skills and attitude towards disability can vary considerably

Despite the Department's efforts to improve teacher's knowledge, many teachers in regular classes felt they did not have the skills or experience to adequately support students with disability. Teachers and parents both indicated some teachers were also reluctant to make adjustments for students with disability. This was because they believe these students do not need adjustments, or do not have the ability to learn. We also heard some families had been told there was no place for their child at their local school.

Teachers and families also advised that some schools do not have the capability to deal with problems when they arise, and may be suspending students rather than managing their needs. Although the Department's educational services staff advise they monitor suspensions, a comprehensive review of how schools support the behavioural needs of students with disability would help shed light on the extent of this issue.

Enhancing hiring practices may be one way to test teachers' skills and attitudes toward disability. Guidance on recruitment criteria for teachers does not explicitly refer to disability. Yet, this may encourage principals to ask teachers' about their understanding of disability and help schools send a message that inclusive practices are important at their school.

### Reasonable access to technology, but more is needed on classroom support

Teachers indicate they have reasonable access to technology and equipment to support students with disability. However, many wanted more advice on the best tools to use.

Many teachers, particularly those teaching regular classes, also want more teachers' aides, called school learning and support officers. They saw them as one of the most useful ways to support students with disability. However, further guidance is needed to ensure all teachers are effectively using school learning and support officers in the classroom, and not relying on them to manage behavioural problems in the classroom.

### Individual student outcomes monitored, but more needed on overall performance

Improving the educational outcomes of students with disability can result in better social, health and employment prospects for students, delivering benefits for the entire community. We found that teachers monitor the educational outcomes of their students in various ways, including standard classroom assessments and NAPLAN results. As part of the national data collection rolled out in 2015, all schools must now record adjustments for students with disability. In time, this should help teachers recognise and respond to students' needs and monitor their progress.

However, it is not yet possible to determine overall school performance in improving the learning outcomes of students with disability. There may be a way to do this in future. In 2015, the Department introduced a framework to improve how schools monitor and report their performance. It should see how this framework can also be used to monitor overall school performance regarding students with disability.

## Recommendations

### The Department should:

By December 2016:

1. improve information on its website for students with disability and their families by:
  - developing clearer, more readily accessible information in plain English
  - providing guidance on reasonable adjustments, including case studies on how schools tailor support to meet students' needs
2. review its guidance for school website content to see if information on supporting students with disability can be improved, and encourage schools to update their websites in line with this.

By July 2017:

3. encourage more teachers to complete both modules of the disability standards training
4. continue to streamline its processes for requesting a support class placement and integration funding to meet the educational needs of students with disability
5. provide additional guidance to schools and parents to strengthen their understanding of what effective consultation looks like regarding support for students with disability
6. provide guidance to schools on supporting students who need occupational therapy and speech pathology services, including working with other service providers
7. develop guidance for its teachers on ways to use school learning and support officers more effectively in the classroom

8. examine how recruitment practices can be used to encourage schools to check prospective teachers for their understanding of support for students with disability
9. review how schools support the behavioural needs of students with disability to:
  - ensure the appropriate use of school discipline and suspension policies
  - address any issues in how schools support children when behavioural problems arise
10. provide more guidance for teachers to help them make decisions on the most useful assistive technology and other equipment to support students' learning needs.

By December 2017:

11. encourage learning and support teachers to take up professional learning opportunities to help them to improve their knowledge and skills in supporting students with disability
12. examine and implement further strategies to help teachers meet the learning needs of students with autism and mental health conditions
13. improve how it monitors the learning outcomes for students with disability, specifically:
  - see how the School Excellence Framework can be used by schools to monitor and report on their overall performance in improving learning outcomes for students with disability
  - report on its success in improving the educational achievements of students with disability from a state-wide perspective.

# Introduction

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## 1. Support for students with disability

### 1.1 Students with disability

In New South Wales, around three quarters of students with disability attend public schools. The Department of Education (the Department) estimates that more than 91,000 students or over 12 per cent of students in public schools have a disability requiring support. These students may have:

- problems speaking and understanding language
- a physical condition that limits how they function
- mild to severe intellectual disability
- mental health problems affecting their wellbeing
- an autism spectrum disorder affecting their communication and social skills.

In recent years, the number of students with a diagnosed disability has increased, especially students with autism and mental health conditions. An Australian Bureau of Statistics survey on disability and aging found that the prevalence of autism in Australia increased 79 per cent in the three years from 2009 to 2012. This increase was greatest in children.

Similarly, a 2013-14 survey by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare estimated that almost one in seven children aged four to 17 years had mental health disorders in the previous 12 months. Almost a third of those had two or more mental health conditions.

### 1.2 Students' right to an education

Enrolling a child with disability in school for the first time can be stressful for parents and carers. They may worry that their child's learning needs may not be met, or that their child will not be included in school activities. Children and Young People with Disability Australia released survey results in 2015 which found that one in four students with disability in Australia was refused school enrolment at some point in their school life.

Since the 1980s, there has been a shift towards a more integrated model of education. This view emphasises the right of children with disability to participate in education on the same basis as students without disability. Under Australian disability discrimination law, schools cannot discriminate based on a person's disability by, for example:

- refusing to accept a child's application for enrolment because of disability
- denying or limiting a student's access to benefits provided at the school
- expelling a student or disadvantaging them in some other way because of disability
- developing curricula or training that will exclude the person from participating.

The Disability Standards for Education issued in 2005 outline schools' obligations to ensure that students with disability access and participate in education without experiencing discrimination. Schools must assess students' learning needs, and make reasonable adjustments to their education with input from students and their families. In New South Wales, all students have the right to attend their local public school.

### 1.3 Educational settings for students with disability in NSW public schools

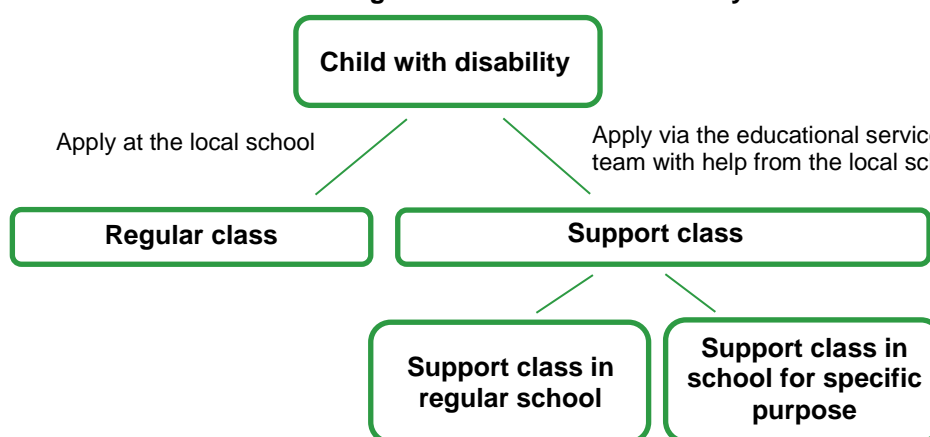
The Department of Education provides support for children with disability to attend a public school. There are three educational settings for students with disability: a regular class in a regular school, a support class in a regular school, or a support class in a school for specific purpose. Support classes are not available in all areas of the state. In 2015, around 80 per cent of students with disability in public schools were enrolled in regular classes. Whether students with disability attend regular classes or support classes is informed by the choices and preferences of their parents.



Schools manage enrolments based on their catchment zone and out of area applications. A school may request additional funding to support a child with disability in a regular class, called 'integration funding'. This is managed by the Department's educational services staff.

Applications for support classes are determined by a placement panel which is generally made up of educational services staff, school principals and counsellors. This means that a family living next to a school with a support class cannot apply directly to the school to enrol their child in this class. Their local school will, however, help them to apply for a support class through the panel selection process. Whether their child is accepted into a support class depends on the needs of the child and if suitable places are available. They may, for example, be offered a place in a support class at a school in a different location, that is, not their local school.

### Exhibit 1: Educational settings for students with disability



Source: Audit Office research.

Support classes cater for a range of disability types including intellectual disability, autism, emotional disturbance and behavioural problems. Schools for specific purposes generally cater for students with more complex needs and have more intensive levels of support.

## 1.4 Government disability initiatives in schools

Significant changes have been made in recent years to improve support for students with disability at the state and national level. In New South Wales, the Department of Education introduced *Every Student, Every School* in 2012. This strategy recognises that many students may require help with their learning, regardless of whether or not they have a diagnosed disability. Some initiatives include establishing specialist learning and support teachers in schools and providing additional training for teachers.

'Every Student, Every School' is structured around a learning and support framework which encourages teachers to provide personalised support for students' learning by:

- consulting with parents of students with disability
- assessing students' learning needs
- making tailored adjustments to assist students' learning
- monitoring the impact of adjustments.

Under the Department's *Local Schools Local Decisions* reform, principals now also have greater discretion in how they use their school funds. This includes discretionary funds based on the level of student learning needs in a school, and integration funding for students in regular classes. The Department also advises that the proportion of state education funding allocated directly to schools has increased from 10 per cent in 2012 to around 70 per cent in 2015. This means more money is going directly to schools.

The Department's initiatives take place alongside a number of national education and disability reforms. These include a review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005, Australian curriculum and national teaching standards, and a national data collection on disability in schools.

## 1.5 What this audit is about

This audit assessed how well the Department of Education is managing the transition to school for students with disability and supporting teachers to improve these students' educational outcomes. It answered the following questions:

- is the Department identifying and meeting the needs of students with disability when they start a new school?
- is the Department effectively supporting teachers to achieve their desired learning outcomes for students with disability?

By 'the Department', we mean activities undertaken by head office, school regions/networks, and schools. As part of this audit, we reviewed key policies, procedures, and data relating students with disability. We also visited 12 NSW public schools and surveyed school staff and families about their experiences with disability in the education system. We received almost 900 responses to the staff survey and around 300 responses to the family survey.

The Department's response to the audit report is at Appendix 1. Further information on the audit scope and criteria is at Appendix 2.

# Key findings

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## 2. Identifying and meeting needs when starting a new school

**The Department has good processes in place for identifying the needs of students with disability when they start at a new school. However, more needs to be done to improve consultation with and information for parents, and to remove barriers which may prevent teachers from tailoring support to students' needs.**

There is a range of useful information and guidance available to parents and students when they start a new school, both on-line and from staff at their local school. However, parents want more information about support available at their local school. Processes to access support classes and obtain funding to support students in regular classes have been streamlined recently, but some teachers and families still thought these were time consuming.

The Department has developed tools and guidelines to assess the learning needs of students with disability and provide them with the necessary support. Teachers and specialist support staff in schools undertake assessments and plan for adjustments to cater for student learning needs.

We found many examples of adjustments for students in the schools we visited. Still, there were a number of barriers to effective adjustments, including a lack of skills and knowledge for some teachers, and insufficient time to plan and apply adjustments in class.

Schools consult with students and their families on proposed adjustments and support. Most respondents to our staff survey thought that their school consults well with families on proposed adjustments. However, many respondents in our family survey expressed the need for better, more helpful communication and consultation by their local school.

### Recommendations

The Department should:

- improve information on its website for students with disability and their families by:
  - developing clearer, more readily accessible information in plain English
  - providing guidance on reasonable adjustments, including case studies on how schools tailor support to meet students' needs
- review its guidance for school website content to see if information on supporting students with disability can be improved, and encourage schools to update their websites in line with this
- continue to streamline its processes for requesting a support class placement and integration funding to meet the educational needs of students with disability
- provide additional guidance to schools and parents to strengthen their understanding of what effective consultation looks like regarding support for students with disability.

### 2.1 Information on support for students with disability and their families

The Department and schools provide a range of useful information and guidance to assist parents and students on schooling options. Information is available on-line and through school principals, learning and support teachers, classroom teachers, and educational services staff. Our survey results and meetings with stakeholders indicate, however, that the Department and schools need to make information more accessible to parents and students on the support available at their local school.

#### **The Department has prepared information on disability for families and students**

The Department has developed a range of information for students and their families on the support available in schools to assist with enrolment. This includes factsheets, brochures and information on the Department's website.

## Exhibit 2: Guidelines for families with disability

**Getting ready for school guide:** this explains how parents with a child with disability should engage with their local school. The guide recommends they contact the school 12 to 24 months before enrolment. It outlines enrolment options and provides details on how students and parents can access additional support.

**Disability in regular classrooms factsheet:** this outlines the Department's *Every Student, Every School* strategy, which aims to improve the capacity of schools to respond effectively to the needs of all students with disability.

Source: NSW Department of Education.

A range of other information is available on the Department's website for students with disability, including enrolment options, student assessment processes, disability criteria, and the role of each school's learning and support team.

The Department also provides funding to a small number of community organisations which provide parent and community support for children with disability. Families we surveyed said that advocacy groups were the most useful source of information on disability and schools.

### Improvements to the Department's website are needed

While there is a great deal of information on the Department's website, it is spread across a range of pages and links. Our family survey highlighted the difficulties some families face in obtaining useful information and guidance on enrolment and support options for their child. Many families said information was difficult to obtain and not always useful. In fact, the Department's website was cited by families as the least useful source of information.

The Department is aware of these issues and plans to update its website. It advised it has recently undertaken stakeholder consultation on the information needs of families of students with disability and how this information can be best organised on its website.

### Schools provide information on disability support in meetings with parents

Schools provide information to families on disability support during meetings at student enrolment and orientation. Key personnel in the school provide guidance, including the principal, classroom teachers, learning and support teacher, and school counsellor.

All schools we visited held orientation days at which parents could gather information on disability support. During enrolment and orientation, the principal, teachers and specialist staff develop an understanding of the needs of each student and discuss schooling options with the family. Students and parents are also able to seek guidance from specialist staff in the Department's educational services team who provide disability support to schools.

### Information provided on school websites should also improve

Schools we visited provided limited guidance for families explaining their rights and the support they can expect for their child at their local school. Most school websites did, however, have links to the Department's website.

The need for better information from schools was supported by our staff survey results with:

- a quarter of respondents reporting that they provide information on disability support options on their website
- 12 per cent of respondents reporting that they develop handouts on disability support options
- half of respondents reporting that they provide information on the Department's processes for accessing additional funds for students who meet the disability criteria.

Parents want a range of information from their local school. The following table compares what parents want with the information provided on the websites of the schools we visited.

### Exhibit 3: What parents want and what schools provide on their website

| What parents want to know from their local school   | The school websites of the 12 schools we visited offered the following information:   |
|---|---|
| <b>What rights their child has and how they access their local school</b>                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All sites advise that every student is entitled to attend a public school.</li> <li>• All sites encourage discussion of the child's needs with the principal and provide links to a Department web page on enrolment.</li> <li>• Five sites describe their catchment area for enrolment.</li> <li>• None specifically advise that students with disability are entitled to enrol in their local school.</li> </ul> |
| <b>Whether their local school will have the capability to support their child</b>                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All sites refer to learning programs to help students with special needs.</li> <li>• All sites provide links to the Department's web page describing the learning and support teacher role.</li> <li>• Only two sites describe the role of the learning and support team.</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Key personnel in the school or Department who have knowledge on disability</b>                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All sites advise parents to contact the principal about learning and support staff.</li> <li>• Three sites list titles of learning and support team members.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Examples of adjustments or other tailored support that their local school will provide their child</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nine sites provide a link to a Department page that describes learning programs, such as reading recovery.</li> <li>• Two sites mention use of school learning and support officers to support students.</li> <li>• No sites have examples of adjustments used by the school to support additional learning needs.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Whether there is a support class in the school and how to access it</b>                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All sites provide a link to a Department web page that describes enrolment in a support class.</li> <li>• Three sites of the eight schools with support classes state that they have a support class.</li> </ul>   |

Source: Audit Office of NSW research of school websites.

These results indicate that parents expect more comprehensive information from schools than is currently provided on their websites.

#### Some schools are reluctant to accept some students with disability

A number of parents and stakeholder groups we spoke to raised the issue of schools not accepting some children with disability. This was reinforced by our family survey where one in four of the 300 respondents advised they had been told by staff there was no place for their child at their local school.

Two schools we visited raised concerns about students to be enrolled at their school, with one school admitting it had told a student's family it could not accept the student. In these cases, teachers were worried they could not meet the needs of these students. For example, they were not sure how they could tailor support to accommodate students' needs, particularly students requiring a high level of support. We discuss how the Department supports teachers in this way in chapter 3.

## 2.2 Identifying the learning and support needs of students with disability

We found good processes in place to identify the learning and support needs of students with disability. Class teachers and specialist support staff at schools observe students, speak to parents, obtain information from a child's previous school or pre-school, and assess students to identify their learning needs. However, there are some barriers to timely assessments, including parents being reluctant to accept that their child has a disability and information not always being transferred from previous schools.

### **Processes are in place to identify students' learning needs**

The Department has many processes in place to gather information on student learning needs including:

- an enrolment form requesting information on a child's learning and support needs
- a template to assist schools to seek student information from other schools/preschools
- meetings with parents to discuss their child's disability and learning needs
- observing students at orientation days and in the classroom
- assessments from external professionals, such as paediatricians and speech therapists
- Best Start assessment for all kindergarten students that focuses on learning needs
- analysing NAPLAN results.

School learning and support teachers and school counsellors also have a range of assessment tools available to identify aspects of learning requiring support, including speech, reading and comprehension.

In addition, the Department has recently developed the Personalised Learning and Support Signposting Tool (PLASST). This is a functional assessment tool designed to help teachers assess a student's relative strengths and needs.

### **Exhibit 4: PLASST – Personalised Learning and Support Signposting Tool**

The PLASST is a web-based tool designed by the Department to assist teachers and school learning and support teams to identify the educational needs of students who may benefit from additional support.

The PLASST generates a student profile report for an individual student in response to a set of questions completed on-line by their teacher. The student profile report highlights the relative strengths and needs of the student and where they may benefit from adjustments or support. The student profile can be used to inform decision making and planning by teachers and learning and support teams to provide additional specific support for a student, in consultation with their parents or carers.

The PLASST is an optional tool and can be used for any student whom teachers believe has support needs.

Source: NSW Department of Education.

### **Teachers try to identify student learning needs before students start school**

Schools generally indicated that some student needs can be identified before they start school, either by the preschool, by the Department's early intervention staff, or by the student's family. This allows transition into school to happen early, enabling the student to familiarise themselves with teaching staff and their new classroom. It also allows for any physical adjustments, such as ramps or equipment, to be organised well before their first day at school.

Some schools said there were barriers preventing them from identifying needs early, for example, parents may be reluctant to have their child singled out as having learning difficulties, which can delay further assessments being undertaken. Staff at one high school we visited indicated they had identified many students with disabilities who had not been identified as having learning difficulties in primary school. The families we surveyed raised similar concerns about delays in identifying needs.

The Department advised us that additional learning needs can be identified by high school staff during transition for some students, as it is a very different environment from primary school. For example, some students who function well in a primary school setting, with the same teacher and the same classroom, may struggle in a high school setting and require additional support. These issues highlight the importance of having good processes in place for students to transition to primary or high school.

### **Teachers and regional staff said getting extra support can be time consuming**

Schools, families and the Department's educational services staff flagged a range of concerns with the process for obtaining additional support, citing delays, inefficiencies and IT system breakdowns. Additional support includes a place in a support class, funding for support in a regular class, or access to an itinerant support teacher. The process for obtaining this support is called the access request process.

Problems cited with the access request process include:

- decisions on integration funding are slow, with input required from too many people
- it is prescriptive and time consuming and has increased the workload for staff
- requests need to be transferred between schools and regions multiple times to correct or clarify information
- the IT system is not user friendly and crashes on a regular basis
- no maximum timeframe has been set for the processing of access requests.

Educational services staff advised that they liaise with schools during the process to ensure accurate and meaningful information is included in access requests. We found that only two per cent of access requests are declined, indicating that educational services teams are supporting schools with this process.

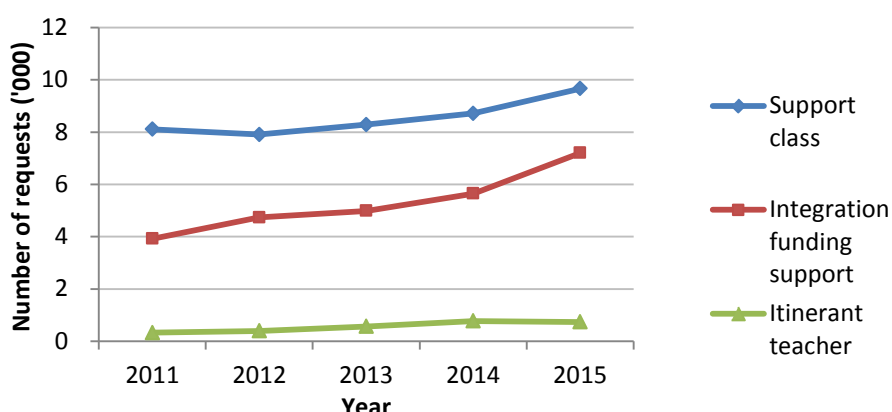
The Department advised access requests for students seeking integration funding are actioned quickly, with schools provided with preliminary advice to confirm the level of funding. In 2015, it also changed the process for approving integration funding. Requests are now reviewed when they are submitted, rather than waiting for an expert panel to convene to make a determination. The Department advised that while schools are waiting for a determination, they can also access their global budget to meet the needs of a student.

### **Requests for additional support have increased significantly**

The number of requests for additional support, including support class placement, integration funding, and itinerant teacher support, has increased from 8,828 to 14,294, or more than 60 per cent, since 2011.

Parents and schools can request more than one type of support on the same access request form. The highest number of requests is for support classes followed by integration funding.

### Exhibit 5: Access requests by support type



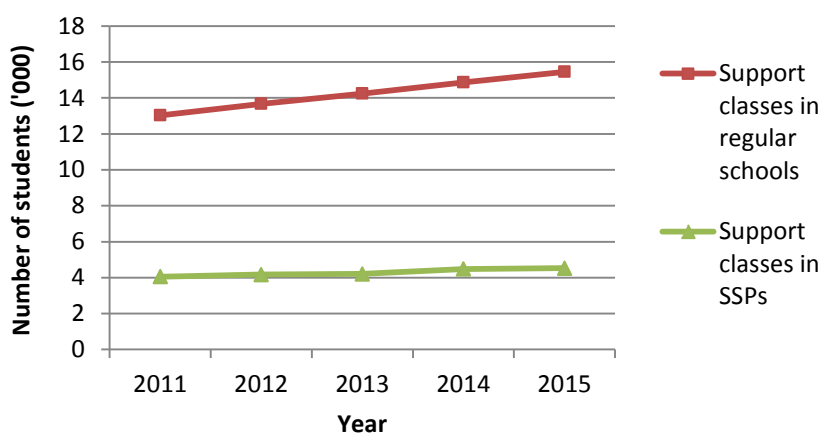
Source: Department of Education 2016.

Requests for additional support that do not meet eligibility criteria may be declined. When this occurs, educational services staff advised they liaise with the school regarding plans to support the student's learning needs and provide assistance as required. This could include advice about how to best use the school's learning and support teacher and other school resources.

### The number of students in support classes has increased

The number of students enrolled in support classes has increased 17 per cent in the last four years. This reflects a 19 per cent increase in students in support classes in regular schools, and 12 per cent increase in schools for specific purposes (SSPs).

### Exhibit 6: Number of students in support classes



Source: Audit Office analysis of data from Department of Education.

There are currently about 2,900 support classes in around 720 NSW public schools. Of these schools, 106 are schools for specific purposes. The Department is monitoring the current growth in the number of student places in support classes. It advised it is managing the demand to ensure that schools do not simply refer challenging students to these classes, but choose the option that will best meet these students' needs.

### More funding is now going directly to schools

In 2012 the Department introduced a new disability funding model. All regular schools are now allocated additional disability funding which they can use as part of their discretionary budget, called flexible funding. This funding has increased by 54 per cent since 2012.



## Exhibit 7: Flexible disability funding

| Year    | 2012         | 2013         | 2014         | 2015         |
|---------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Funding | \$39,874,756 | \$40,849,438 | \$50,239,042 | \$61,523,042 |

Source: NSW Department of Education, Resource Allocation Model 2015, Equity Loadings for Low Level Disability.

Flexible funding provided to schools is part of a disability equity allocation which also includes funding for learning and support teachers. The introduction of this funding follows a decrease in the number of students receiving individualised integration funding to attend a regular class, from about 17,000 students in 2012 to 8,000 in 2015. The Department advises that these students are now supported through the disability equity allocation.

The disability funding forms part of each school's total discretionary budget. In addition, the Department advised that the proportion of state education funding allocated directly to schools has increased from 10 per cent in 2012 to around 70 per cent in 2015. This means more money is going directly to schools.

### 2.3 Tailoring support to meet individual student needs

We found examples of adjustments and other tailored support for students with disability in schools we visited. Relevant personnel are in schools to help teachers plan the most appropriate adjustments. However, some barriers still exist, such as a lack of skills and knowledge for some teachers, and insufficient time to plan adjustments in class. Both school staff and families also cited examples of where teachers had refused to make appropriate adjustments.

#### There are policies and guidelines for planning adjustments and other support

The Department has developed guidelines to help schools plan adjustments and other support for students learning needs. These include:

- templates for behavioural support plans and health care plans
- guidance on appropriate adjustments
- guidelines for supporting students' behaviour and social support needs
- guidelines and training packages for supporting students with healthcare needs.

In most schools we visited, teachers provided examples of individual learning plans for students with a diagnosed disability in which they documented adjustments. At least two schools we visited also had learning plans for some students who did not have a formal diagnosis and some other schools we visited recorded adjustments on a database.

However, the process for documenting adjustments for students with no formal diagnosis was unclear in the other schools we visited. These adjustments should now be captured in a new national dataset on students with disability which was rolled out in all schools in 2015. Under this initiative, called the National Consistent Collection of Data, schools must document evidence of adjustments made for all students with disability. We discuss this further in section 3.5.

#### Relevant personnel are available to help teachers plan adjustments

Teachers have access to staff in schools who specialise in disability, such as learning and support teachers and school counsellors, to help them plan the most appropriate adjustments.

Schools can also seek help from specialist staff in the Department's educational services team, such as teachers for hearing and vision difficulties. Some schools indicated they also seek advice and resources from the support class teachers at their school. This is because these teachers generally have more experience and better skills to assist students with disability and usually have access to more resources, including learning aids and assistive technology.

Schools also advised they share information with other schools. Most schools reported that learning and support teacher network meetings are held on a quarterly basis for teachers to share better practice and ideas.

### **Adjustments are tailored to student needs**

Teachers advised they make a range of adjustments to meet their students' needs. These broadly fit into the following categories:

- adjustments to curriculum
- changes to classroom practice
- using specialist learning and teaching resources and aides/tools
- working with other professionals such as occupational and speech therapists
- additional training for teachers of students with disability
- using specialist equipment and/or assistive technology.

We saw many examples of adjustments in the schools we visited. The adjustments were not a one-size-fits-all approach but tailored to the individual learning needs of each student.

### **Exhibit 8: Examples of adjustments**

- Locating a student where he or she feels safe, comfortable and engaged in the classroom.
- Teaching students one-on-one or in small groups.
- Additional time and/or rest breaks for assessment tasks.
- Magnified lesson notes and assessment tasks.
- Suitable furniture and equipment, such as special chairs and pencil grips.
- Flash cards, models, graphics and sensory toys.

Source: Audit Office visits to schools.

Working with school learning and support officers, also called teachers' aides, was also cited by many staff as a common means of delivering personalised learning and support for students.

### **There are some barriers to successful adjustments**

Schools cited a range of barriers to making successful adjustments, including:

- teachers refusing or reluctant to make adjustments, due to poor attitudes towards disability
- lack of teacher skills and knowledge
- shortage of time to research, plan or apply adjustments in class
- lack of support staff to assist with adjustments.

While principals are responsible for how their school supports students with disability, some teachers still thought that principals were not being held accountable for ensuring adjustments were made for students. We believe the new national data collection that requires schools to document evidence of adjustments will help schools focus on this issue. This is because the principals must sign off on adjustments made at their schools.

Teachers also wanted more funding for support staff, including greater access to school learning and support officers, learning and support teachers, and school counsellors to assist with adjustments. We examine teacher skills and access to expert staff in chapter 3.

## **2.4 Consulting with students and families on proposed adjustments**

Schools we visited advised they consulted with students and families about adjustments, with some schools providing evidence of communication with parents. Most respondents to the staff survey thought their school consults well with families but respondents to the family survey expressed the need for better communication.

### **Consultation with families and students about adjustments should improve**

Schools and regional educational services staff indicated they consulted with families and students with disability about proposed adjustments and support, although many parents felt schools should do this better.

Teachers we spoke to during school visits cited examples of communication with families on adjustments. These included:

- daily diaries which are returned to the parents every school day in each student's bag
- consultation with parents on individual learning plans
- meetings, phone calls, emails and letters with parents and specialists
- parent/teacher evenings to allow additional time to discuss student learning needs.

Schools advised they made changes to adjustments, where appropriate, as a result of feedback from parents. Around three quarters of respondents to the staff survey thought their school consults well or very well with families on proposed adjustments.

However, many respondents to the family survey expressed the need for better, more helpful communication and consultation by local school, including proper consideration of parents' opinions. This includes parents being more involved in decision-making, with more face-to-face meetings and greater empathy from staff. The Department should do more to ensure that both schools and parents understand each other's expectations around adjustments and how to consult with each other to achieve the best outcome for all parties.

### **Limited guidance for parents on 'reasonable' adjustments**

There is currently limited information available for families on the Department's website on adjustments, including examples and advice on when adjustments are considered reasonable. As part of our research we found more comprehensive guidance and information on reasonable adjustments.

#### **Exhibit 9: Guidance on adjustments**

- The Queensland Department of Education and Training has a webpage devoted to 'Education Adjustments', which includes links providing a range of adjustments relating to each type of disability.
- The University of Canberra, in collaboration with the states and territories, has produced 'Disability Standards for Education: A Practical Guide for Individuals, Families and Communities', which includes guidance on reasonable adjustments, including a short video, a number of scenarios and questions, and a range of examples of commonly used adjustments.
- The Western Australian Department of Education and Workforce Development has produced 'Reasonable adjustment: A guide to working with students with disability', which provides guidance on when an adjustment is reasonable and a range of examples of adjustments that can be applied to assessment tasks.

Source: Audit Office research.

There is limited information on the Department's and schools' websites explaining reasonable adjustments. The concept of a reasonable adjustment is not easily understood and our survey results indicate parents want more information.

### 3. Supporting teachers to work with students with disability

**In the last few years, the Department has implemented a number of initiatives to help teachers achieve their desired learning outcomes for students with disability. However, some teachers feel they are still not effectively supported, particularly teachers in regular classes.**

The Department has developed a range of professional courses on disability, established specialist learning and support teachers in each school, and provided additional scholarships for teachers to undertake postgraduate study in special education. Most teachers have completed training on the disability standards, which informs teachers of their legal obligations to make adjustments for their students. The Department's new funding model has also enabled school principals to use funds more flexibly to support teacher professional development.

However, there continues to be a gap between the skills and experience of support class and regular class teachers. Classroom teachers want more support to manage student behaviour, and teach students with autism and mental health illnesses, which they say are increasing in schools. Teachers indicated they have reasonable access to assistive technology and equipment, but want more to help them make decisions about the best tools to support their students.

Teachers use classroom and school assessments to monitor how well their adjustments help students to learn. The School Excellence Framework, a new initiative to help schools monitor their overall performance, should also help them monitor the learning outcomes of students with disability. There is still room for improvement regarding how some schools respond to problems as they arise, with perceptions that a disproportionate number of students with disability are being suspended.

#### **Recommendations**

The Department should:

- encourage more teachers to complete both modules of the disability standards training
- encourage learning and support teachers to take up professional learning opportunities to help them to improve their knowledge and skills in supporting students with disability
- examine and implement further strategies to help teachers meet the learning needs of students with autism and mental health conditions
- provide guidance to schools on supporting students who need occupational therapy and speech pathology services, including working with other service providers
- develop guidance for its teachers on ways to use school learning and support officers more effectively in the classroom
- review how schools support the behavioural needs of students with disability to:
  - ensure the appropriate use of school discipline and suspension policies
  - address any issues in how schools support children when behavioural problems arise
- provide more guidance for teachers to help them make decisions on the most useful assistive technology and other equipment to support students' learning needs
- examine how recruitment practices can be used to encourage schools to check prospective teachers for their understanding of support for students with disability
- improve how it monitors the learning outcomes for students with disability, specifically:
  - see how the School Excellence Framework can be used by schools to monitor and report on their overall performance in improving learning outcomes for students with disability
  - report its success in improving the learning outcomes of students with disability from a state-wide perspective.

### 3.1 Teacher skills

Teachers' skills and experience varies considerably depending on their role, with special education teachers in a support class generally having better skills to teach children with disability than regular classroom teachers. The Department has introduced disability training to improve teachers' skills, however, more is needed to support regular classroom teachers manage their students' diverse learning needs.

#### The Department encourages teachers to take up training on disability

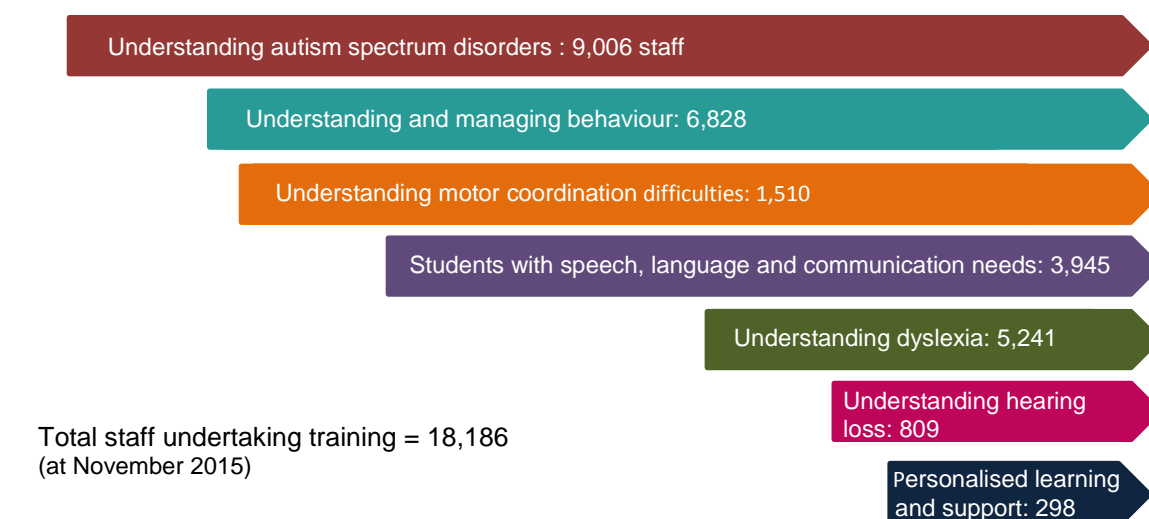
The Department offers a range of professional training on disability, with courses offered face-to-face and online. Since 2008, it has progressively introduced training on a range of topics, including understanding the disability standards, personalised learning and support, autism, and managing behaviour. The Department's courses are registered with Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards, and they form part of the professional standards for teachers.

Almost every teacher has completed the first module on the disability standards for education which covers a teacher's legal obligation to support students with disability. This is a worthwhile achievement, as it helps teachers to understand their obligations around making adjustments for students with disability.

In addition, in the past seven years over 18,000, or 20 per cent, of school staff have completed at least one other specialist course on disability. Most staff indicated that completing the training helped increase their confidence in meeting student needs, which is an encouraging outcome.

#### Exhibit 10: Total number of school staff undertaking training on disability

| 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 |
|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|



Source: NSW Department of Education.

Over the past few years, the Department has provided more than 300 scholarships for teachers to undertake post graduate qualifications in special education. There are now almost 3,800 teachers in NSW recorded as having special education qualifications.

#### Schools can arrange training according to teachers' needs

Schools now have a greater authority to manage their resources, in line with the Department's *Local schools, Local decisions* policy. Principals can decide how best to use their funds and make faster decisions depending on the needs of their students. We saw a number of examples where schools had arranged professional learning for their staff on disability.

## **Exhibit 11: Examples of schools arranging disability training for their teachers**

### **Peer learning**

Toronto High School arranged 'peer learning' between regular and support class teachers. A teacher in the regular class was released from face-to-face teaching to work with the support class teacher to prepare lesson plans for students with disability. This occurred for three days each year.

### **Professional training**

One Sydney school we visited organised training for some of its staff using flexible funds after a student with Down Syndrome enrolled at the school. The course trained staff on using different visual supports in their teaching in order to help compensate for memory limitations of children who have Down Syndrome.

### **Local partnerships**

Lambton High School has engaged with a local university to provide opportunities for student teachers to obtain work experience in its school. This provides the student teachers with additional practical experience and exposure to students with disability.

Source: NSW Department of Education, Audit Office school visits.

## **Processes are in place to examine teacher skills**

Schools have various processes in place to monitor the skill level of teachers, and check how well they are supporting students with disability. Some of these include:

- observing teachers in classes
- checking teachers' programs to see what adjustments are being made
- monitoring student results to check the effectiveness of adjustments
- helping teachers meet teaching standards through performance development processes
- increased referrals to learning and support staff in schools
- monitoring school suspensions and expulsions.

The challenge for school leaders will be to ensure that these processes to monitor teacher skills are used regularly. We visited some schools that indicated they consistently checked on teacher programs to ensure they were making appropriate adjustments for students. However, other schools we visited advised that these checks on teachers typically occurred only after a problem had arisen in class.

## **Teachers want more training but time is a barrier**

Some teachers in regular classes report that they lack the skills or confidence to support students with disability. Most teachers we surveyed said that they were challenged by the range and complexity of students' needs and wanted more training to help address this. Teachers said this was a particular challenge for new teachers with limited special education experience.

As expected, teachers in support classes were perceived as being better skilled at supporting students with disability. Teachers in schools for specific purposes rated their level of skill and training higher than other school settings.

Teachers reported the biggest barrier to undertaking training was the inability to obtain time away from class. Competing demands, from preparing programs to extra-curricular activities, made seeking time off for training difficult. The introduction of flexible disability funding and greater decision making control over budgets by principals can help address this. Schools can use these funds to buy relief time to enable staff to attend training. Several schools we visited had rostered relief time. However, given the funds are discretionary, the extent to which schools use the funds in this way depends on the priorities of individual schools.

The Department and schools should continue investigating how to make disability training more accessible to teachers, for example, through peer learning with a support class

teacher, specialist mentoring in class, through staff meetings, or team teaching where two teachers teach a class together.

### **Attitudes toward disability affect school culture**

Teachers' attitudes towards disability are critical in determining how well schools support their students. Staff at two of the twelve schools we visited said there was a minority group of teachers who did not make appropriate adjustments for students or did not always include these students in general class activities.

Teachers and families we surveyed similarly raised the issue of cultural resistance as a barrier, for example, a belief among staff that a student with disability does not need an adjustment, or has limited ability to learn. Some families also cited bullying and inappropriate responses by school staff as further examples of cultural resistance in schools.

The Department recognises that school culture plays an important role in engaging students in the classroom. In 2015, it put in place two initiatives which highlight that the school environment is key to student learning and growth. These initiatives are:

- a School Excellence Framework which defines core elements of high performing schools, including culture and wellbeing (see more on this framework in section 3.5)
- a School Wellbeing Framework which outlines in more detail the key attributes a school should have in place to improve the wellbeing of its students.

The Wellbeing Framework references personalised learning, and inclusive, respectful environments. Frameworks such as these are a step in the right direction, and important in setting a positive, inclusive tone. A number of schools we visited discussed the role of their well-being coordinators. Changing school culture is an incremental process, and as these initiatives are relatively new it may take time for them to translate into changes in school practice.

There may also be a way to influence the culture of schools through recruitment practices. Unlike for some student groups, such as gifted and talented or Aboriginal students, the Department's guidance on selection criteria to recruit teachers does not explicitly focus on students with disability. The Department should examine ways to ensure schools check prospective teachers' attitudes towards disability.

Currently, the Department provides two training modules on the disability standards that cover legislation on discrimination and teacher responsibilities. While most teachers have undertaken the first module, there appears to be no incentive for them to undertake the second. If teachers were encouraged to complete both modules, this may help improve their understanding of their obligations under the standards.

### **Schools' responses to problems vary**

Both families and teachers advised some schools respond well when problems arise, while others struggle, particularly in response to behavioural problems. The following parent's comments mirror the sentiments from many families and teachers who completed our survey.

(How a school responds to problems) ...is very dependent on the individual teacher and also by the principal and school executive in setting the school culture. (My child's) kindy teacher, an Assistant Principal, did not handle problems at all well, and while my child remained ... overseen by her, problems were not addressed. However, the teacher this year has been reasonably proactive in responding to problems and listening to my input as a parent on how to deal with them.

We found when problems arise, teachers and families want similar things. Common themes were an inclusive culture and trained, knowledgeable staff.

## Exhibit 12: What teachers and parents want when problems arise

| What parents want:   | What teachers want:  |
|--|--|
| 1 Better communication and respectful, proactive, timely consultation by the school. | 1 More staff training on disability and relief time from teaching to gain expertise.                           |
| 2 Adequate numbers of well trained, competent teachers and support staff.            | 2 Access to specialist staff such as learning and support teachers, and counsellors.                           |
| 3 A committed, supportive and compassionate school culture starting at the top.      | 3 A positive inclusive culture with strong leadership from school executive.                                   |
| 4 Schools to be proactive and flexible and address problems when they arise.         | 4 More help to understand behavioural problems especially in students with autism and mental health illnesses. |

Source: Audit Office survey of teachers and families.

Some families and teachers we consulted believe a disproportionate number of students with disability were being suspended from schools. They saw this as a result of schools not having adequate capability to manage problems when they arise, and may be inappropriately suspending students rather than addressing their needs.

Educational services staff advised they monitor suspensions and expulsions that occur in schools. If they notice a higher than usual number of suspensions, they assess whether the behaviour triggering the suspension is attributable to disability, and then determine whether teachers in that school need more support. A more comprehensive review of suspensions would help the Department identify whether students with disability are unreasonably over-represented in suspension data, or whether this is happening in specific schools.

### 3.2 Access to expert advice

Teachers can access various experts for advice, including specialist learning and support teachers located in schools and educational services teams. However, many teachers said they need more expert advisors to help them with behaviour and mental health issues, and better access to allied health service staff.

#### **Learning and support teachers are in schools but some teachers want more access**

In 2012, the Department introduced 1,800 learning and support teachers into schools. The learning and support teacher is responsible for helping teachers meet the learning needs of students, including those with disability. For example, they may advise on possible adjustments or learning plans for students. Learning and support teachers are not assigned to a class. Some schools advised that having this role located within schools made advice on disability more accessible.

Although the role has broad support among teachers, some raised two concerns. The first was that learning and support teachers are not full-time at every school. Some schools shared this role, meaning a learning and support teacher might work two days at one school, and three days at a neighbouring school. The Department uses a formula based on the number of students and NAPLAN results to allocate learning and support teachers. Yet some classroom teachers wanted more access to this resource, particularly to help them support students with complex behavioural needs.

The second area of concern was that learning and support teachers are not required to have special education qualifications. In two of the 12 schools we visited, teachers advised their learning and support teacher did not have the necessary skills to perform of their role. Given these teachers are integral to schools as a source of knowledge and support, the Department should do more to address this issue by encouraging them to take up more professional learning opportunities.



## **Each school must have a learning and support team in place**

In addition to the learning and support teacher, schools are required to have a learning and support team to help teachers meet the learning needs of students, including those with disability. Most teachers we spoke to, and those who completed our survey, thought that learning and support teams were a useful way to seek advice on disability.

### **Exhibit 13: Learning and support teams in schools**

Each school we visited had a learning and support team to advise teachers on working with students with disability. The learning and support team generally comprises:

- the school's counsellor
- learning and support teacher
- Deputy Principal or Assistant Principal
- staff with wellbeing responsibilities such as welfare officers.

If a teacher wants to seek advice about a student with disability, they can refer the matter to the learning and support team. The team meets weekly or fortnightly to discuss appropriate actions to support a student. They may conduct assessments, review learning plans, and seek advice from other specialists if needed.

The best teams have strong support from executive positions within the school, such as assistant principals, head teachers and deputy principals.

Source: NSW Department of Education, Audit Office school visits.

Regular classroom teachers also seek advice from support class teachers if available at their school. Support class teachers are generally more experienced and better skilled at working with students with disability. Support classes also have a range of learning aides, sensory devices or other equipment which could be lent to students in another class if needed. Likewise, we visited a mainstream school that had developed a relationship with a nearby school for specific purpose. The Department advised it supported the development of these relationships by funding schools for specific purposes to share expertise and resources with their local schools.

### **Educational services staff provide advice to schools**

In addition to specialist support teachers in schools, teachers can also seek help from the Department's educational services staff. There are several avenues of support available:

- learning and wellbeing staff
- assistant principals – learning and support
- specialist itinerant teachers.

Learning and wellbeing staff generally get involved when a principal requests help with a specific matter that a school cannot resolve. For example, a school may have a student with severe behavioural problems, so the educational services team could arrange training for teachers on non-violent crisis intervention. Learning and wellbeing staff also work closely with students and their families to help resolve any problems and provide support where needed.

Assistant principals - learning and support provide teachers with one-on-one specialist advice on students with disability. There are currently 96 positions across New South Wales. Itinerant support teachers also provide expert advice on early intervention, hearing difficulties, vision impairment and transition for students with disability.

The Department is also establishing specialist 'networked specialist centres'. These will support school students with complex needs and link them with other government and community agencies.

### **Flexible funding is assisting schools to access external expertise**

Schools have been making effective use of the Department's flexible funding model by purchasing expert resources, for example, a few schools funded specialists to assist students. This includes occupational therapists, speech pathologists and specialist psychologists. This has helped teachers' access professional advice to support students in their class.

Some schools have also formed partnerships with community organisations in their local area to access a range of support services. For example, one school developed a partnership with a community mental health organisation and received donated technology and access to mental health advisors to improve student wellbeing.

### **Teachers want more access to counsellors and allied health staff**

Many teachers indicated they wanted more school counsellors so they can adequately support all students with disability. For example, at the schools we visited, counsellors worked approximately two to four days per week. Some school counsellors told us this made their role reactive rather than proactive. This was particularly the case in schools where there were high support needs, for example, students experiencing trauma.

The Department allocates counsellors centrally, therefore schools have limited opportunity to use their flexible disability funds to access more counsellors. The Department advised a process is underway to fund an extra 236 school counsellor positions, which it expects to roll out into schools by the end of 2016. The Department also advises it has changed the counsellor allocation model for high needs areas in consultation with stakeholders.

Another area of challenge for schools was accessing external specialists, such as occupational health therapists, specialist psychologists, and speech pathologists. While some schools have been able to use their flexible funding to access these specialists, most teachers we surveyed indicated that they had little or no access to them when needed.

These specialists are integral to disability support and can help teachers plan programs and adjustments to reflect a child's needs. Psychologists are often required to diagnose students, which is necessary to access integration funding and support classes. Speech pathologists help improve students' communication skills, and occupational therapists help students' develop their functional skills, such as hand-eye coordination and fine motor skills.

The Queensland Department of Education currently employs physiotherapists and occupational therapists to assist students in its schools when required. We recognise, however, that disability support of this nature is changing as a result of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) which is being progressively introduced from July 2016. Support provided by schools and the NDIS has different aims; the former being to support students' learning, and the latter to support peoples' daily living.

The NDIS is responsible for providing allied health support including occupational therapists and speech pathologists. If an increasing number of students qualify for this type of support through the NDIS, the Department should find ways for teachers to work with and learn from allied health professionals to support students in the classroom.

### **3.3 Access to support personnel in the classroom**

Many schools have access to teachers' aides, called school learning and support officers, in regular and support classes. Teachers want more school learning and support officers, however, more guidance needs to be provided to teachers to make effective use of the school learning and support officers they currently have.

## **School learning and support officers help teachers in the classroom**

All schools we visited used school learning and support officers to varying degrees in their regular and support classes. School learning and support officers provide classroom support so teachers can focus on helping their students learn. This includes attending to the personal care needs of students with disability.

Many teachers we spoke to indicated their school learning and support officers were well-trained and highly skilled. Most schools we visited also advised they used their flexible disability funding to engage more school learning and support officers. We saw examples of good practice in using school learning and support officers at schools.

### **Exhibit 14: Use of school learning and support officers**

#### **Staff roster**

At Peakhurst Public School, the learning and support teacher would roster a school learning and support officer onto classes where support was most needed, rather than allocating this person to one student. This helps avoid unnecessary teacher dependence on the school learning and support officer, and also enables the school learning and support officer to be rotated to assist other students.

#### **Best use briefings**

In two of the 12 schools we visited, teachers advised their learning and support teacher had briefed teachers on how best to use their school learning and support officers.

Source: NSW Department of Education, Audit Office school visits.

The Department piloted a performance development framework for school learning and support officers and other non-teaching staff in 2014, and plans to implement it in late 2016. This will give school learning and support officers the opportunity to receive formal performance feedback and find out how their work improves student outcomes.

### **There is limited guidance on the effective use of school learning and support officers**

Many teachers we spoke to said they would benefit from more school learning and support officers. This view was also reflected in our staff survey, where nearly half of the teachers who responded said they had little or no access to a school learning and support officer when needed.

It is not clear to what extent this demand stems from a difficulty in managing students with complex needs or how principals allocate this resource. Some teachers we spoke to said they just want an extra person in the classroom to help out, especially if problems arise.

The Department acknowledges continued demand for school learning and support officers is a complex issue, and is not unique to NSW schools. School executive and learning and support teams have a role to play in helping teachers work with learning and support officers. However, some teachers we spoke to said they were still unsure how they could maximise the use of school learning and support officers in the classroom. In two schools we visited, staff also reported that inexperienced teachers were relying on a school learning and support officer to guide them on the work to do in the classroom. We believe more work should be done to provide guidance on how best to use school learning and support officers in schools.

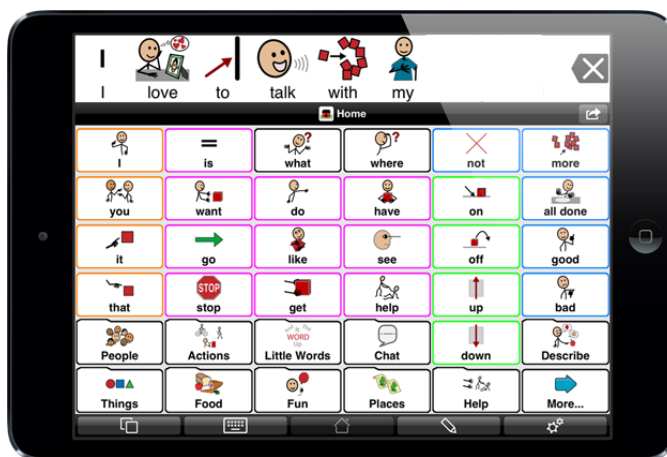
## **3.4 Access to assistive technology and equipment**

Teachers indicate they have reasonable access to assistive technology and equipment, but more should be done to help them make decisions about the best tools to support their students' learning needs.

## Teachers have reasonable access to assistive technology and equipment

Overall, schools have reasonable access to assistive technology, equipment and learning aides. All schools we visited said they had access to assistive technology where it was critical to the learning needs of the student, such as eye gaze technology to help a student to use eye movements to operate a computer.

### Exhibit 15: Tablet app that assists students to develop their communication skills



Source: NSW Department of Education, Audit Office school visits.

Most schools we visited also employed standard technology to assist learning, such as iPads, laptops and computer applications and programs. Schools we visited indicated there was generally funding available to support adjustments for physical disability, including ramps and modifications to classroom buildings.

### Advice on available technology will help teachers make effective use of these

Our survey results indicated there are still some barriers to accessing technology and equipment, including:

- not knowing the most suitable technological item or software program for a student
- the cost of some equipment, particularly sensory equipment and apps for children with communication difficulties, can be quite high
- poor technology support when an item becomes faulty or breaks.

The Department has recently piloted webinars (ie seminars conducted over the internet) aimed at addressing teacher concerns around not knowing what assistive technology to use, or how to use new software programs. The Department should continue to look for ways to help teachers understand the different technologies available and what would be effective learning aides for their students.

## 3.5 Monitoring educational outcomes

Teachers monitor the outcomes of individual students with disability in a range of ways, including standard classroom assessments, NAPLAN results, and annual reports. As part of a national data collection initiative, all schools were required, for the first time in 2015, to record the adjustments made for students with disability. This, along with a new framework to improve how schools monitor and report their performance, will provide considerable potential for determining schools' overall performance in improving learning outcomes for students with disability.

### **Teachers monitor student outcomes but this could be better communicated to families**

Teachers use different ways to monitor the impact of adjustments and educational achievements of students with disability. These include:

- standard assessments and exams undertaken in the classroom
- literacy and numeracy tracking
- school reports on progress against curriculum areas
- consultation with expert staff
- consultation with the student and family
- review by the learning and support team
- NAPLAN results.

Although a majority of teachers we surveyed felt they were monitoring student outcomes and the impact of adjustments, our family survey results indicate more work could be done to communicate this information to parents. Family respondents felt their school did not always monitor how well adjustments were working. Parents of students with disability want more information on the daily activities of their child and the support provided, so they get involved throughout their child's education, and not only when problems occur.

### **Some good practices to collect information are underway in schools**

Although teachers monitor student outcomes and adjustments, only a few schools we visited had formal means to collect such information. Some schools are trying to address this. In two of the 12 schools we visited, information is recorded in the student's profile database. This provided a transparent way for supervisors to ensure teachers were making appropriate efforts to support students. It also allowed other teachers to view the adjustments being made and share approaches. Several teachers in our staff survey reported introducing similar systems in their school.

In addition to any locally developed system, all schools must now record information on disability as part of a national data collection project, called the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data. This is a joint Commonwealth and State initiative that was introduced in all schools in 2015. This type of data on disability has not been previously collected, either at a state or national level. Almost all teachers we spoke to felt this initiative would aid schools to improve how they respond to students' needs and monitor their progress. For a student to be included in the data collection, the school must have evidence of:

- adjustments being provided to the student based on their needs
- ongoing monitoring and review of the adjustments
- consultation with the student and/or parents and carers.

### **More needed on overall school performance in improving learning outcomes**

Although teachers check the performance of individual students, it is not yet possible to determine overall school performance in improving the learning outcomes of students with disability. Data on school NAPLAN results is available, although it is not broken down by student group.

The Department has recently introduced a new framework to help schools monitor and report on their performance, which may go some way to addressing this issue.

## Exhibit 16: School Excellence Framework

In 2015, the Department introduced the School Excellence Framework which outlines the core elements of a school in three key areas: learning, teaching and leading. For example, elements under the learning category that a school must have in place include:

- programs that address the needs of identified groups, including students with disability
- a curriculum that meets community needs and expectations and provides equitable academic opportunities
- teachers who differentiate curriculum delivery to meet the needs of individual students
- analysis of internal and external assessment data to monitor, track and report on student and school performance.

Each year schools must assess their practices against elements in all three areas to inform school planning and reporting.

Source: NSW Department of Education, School Excellence Framework, December 2014.

The School Excellence Framework also includes possible student performance measures, although none specifically relate to students with disability. The Department should see how the School Excellence Framework can be used to help schools monitor and report on their overall performance in improving learning outcomes for students with disability. This information will then help the Department report on its success in improving the educational achievements of students with disability from a state-wide perspective.

# Appendices

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## Appendix 1: Response from Agency



Ms Margaret Crawford  
Auditor-General  
Audit Office of New South Wales  
GPO Box 12  
SYDNEY NSW 2001

DGL16/406

Dear Ms Crawford

I write with reference to your letter of 26 April 2016 about the Performance Audit - Supporting students with disability in NSW public schools (your reference: PA6573).

Thank you for the final report of the performance audit. The Department has reviewed the report and prepared the attached response to each of the recommendations.

The Department is strongly committed to providing high quality learning experiences for all students in NSW public schools, including more than 90,000 students whose learning is impacted by disability.

An extensive program of reform is underway in NSW public schools to strengthen education outcomes for all students. These reforms are increasing the authority of principals for leading and making decisions about the way that resources allocated to schools are best used to support all students in their learning, including those whose learning is impacted by disability. The new School Excellence Framework and related assessment and validation processes support school accountabilities and continuous improvement in meeting the education needs of every student.

In addition, since 2012 through the ongoing reform initiative Every Student, Every School, the Department has increased the specialist resources provided to every regular NSW public school for supporting students with disability. This is accompanied by the delivery of an increased range of professional learning options for teachers to support their knowledge and skills in teaching students with disability and new tools to assist their work in providing personalised learning and support.

I would like to thank the Audit Office team for their work looking into the Department's provisions in this important area of education. The recommendations will enable the Department and schools to build on current reforms and achievements and further strengthen the provision of personalised learning and support for students with disability.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Peter Riordan'.

Peter Riordan  
**ACTING SECRETARY**  
**DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**  
10 May 2016

NSW Department of Education  
35 Bridge Street Sydney NSW 2000 GPO Box 33 Sydney NSW 2001 T 02 9561 8000 F 02 9561 8465  
[www.det.nsw.edu.au](http://www.det.nsw.edu.au)

**Auditor-General Final Report: Supporting Students with Disability in NSW Public Schools**  
**NSW Department of Education response to recommendations**

| Recommendation  | DoE response | Comments   |
|---|--------------|--|
| <p><b>By December 2016</b></p> <p>1. Improve information on its website for students with disability and their families by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- developing clearer, more readily accessible information in plain English</li> <li>- providing guidance on reasonable adjustments, including case studies on how schools tailor support to meet students' needs.</li> </ul> | Supported    | The Department will build on preliminary work that has been undertaken in consultation with parents and education stakeholders to develop a new website format and updated content about support for students with disability. This will include information already available through the Department's website about the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and its relationship with schools.   |
| <p>2. Review its guidance for school website content to see if information on supporting students with disability can be improved, and encourage schools to update their websites in line with this.</p>  | Supported    | The Department already provides information about support for students with disability offered by every NSW public school, together with a link to more information about the full range of support services for students with disability, on every school's listing on the Public Schools NSW website. The Department will consider ways to improve school website information in the context of this provision and website development, referred to above. |
| <p><b>By July 2017</b></p> <p>3. Encourage more teachers to complete both modules of the disability standards training.</p>   | Supported    | The Department will develop a strategy to build on the numbers of staff who have already undertaken training in the Disability Standards for Education. To date, more than 64,000 individual 'Part 1' modules have been undertaken since their introduction in 2013 and more than 16,900 'Part 2' modules have been undertaken since their introduction in 2014.   |
| <p>4. Continue to streamline its processes for requesting a support class placement and integration funding to meet the educational needs of students with disability</p>   | Supported    | The Department has established a Stakeholder Advisory Group to assist it in improving processes for planning for, and access for students to, specialist support provisions.   |



|   |                  |   |
|---|------------------|---|
| <p>5. Provide additional guidance to schools and parents to strengthen their understanding of what effective consultation looks like regarding support for students with disability.</p>  | <p>Supported</p> | <p>The Department will consider opportunities available through the new annual disability data collection and its focus on personalised learning and support for extending teachers' knowledge and skills in effective consultation.</p>  |
| <p>6. Provide guidance to schools on supporting students who need occupational therapy and speech pathology services, including working with other service providers.</p>   | <p>Supported</p> | <p>The Department is preparing to consult in Term 2, 2016 with stakeholders over new guidelines and materials to support principal and school engagement with third party providers, including occupational therapy and speech pathology. The transition to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) provides important context for this work.</p>   |
| <p>7. Develop guidance for its teachers on ways to use school learning and support officers more effectively in the classroom.</p>  | <p>Supported</p> | <p>The Department will consider how best to provide guidance for teachers on effective use of school learning and support officers in the context of assessment of student learning and support needs as the basis for decision making about adjustments.</p>   |
| <p>8. Examine how recruitment practices can be used to encourage schools to check prospective teachers for their understanding of support for students with disability.</p>   | <p>Supported</p> | <p>The Department already has processes in place to support the performance development of teachers and their registration against the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers. These Standards use nationally agreed indicators of teacher quality to guide the preparation, support and development of teachers throughout their careers. They include specific expectations for demonstrating knowledge and skills in responding to diverse student needs, including disability. Examination of options for enhancing recruitment practices will be undertaken within this context.</p> |
| <p>9. Review how schools support the behavioural needs of students with disability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ensure the appropriate use of school discipline and suspension policies</li> <li>- address any issues in how schools support children when behavioural problems arise.</li> </ul> | <p>Supported</p> | <p>The Department recognises the importance of supporting students who have behavioural needs and their teachers to enable the delivery of quality learning and support that meets each student's specific needs. In addressing this recommendation, the Department will give consideration to ways in which Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) can be used to strengthen school responses to support the behavioural needs of students</p>  |

|   |                        |   |
|---|------------------------|---|
|   |                        | with disability.  |
| 10. Provide more guidance for teachers to help them make decisions on the most useful assistive technology and other equipment to support students' learning needs.   | Supported              | The Department will build on the successful trial in 2015 of webinars to support teacher use of technology accessibility functions to develop and trial new webinars to support teacher decision making about assistive technology and other equipment to support student learning needs.   |
| By December 2017<br>11. Encourage learning and support teachers to take up professional learning opportunities to help them to improve their knowledge and skills in supporting students with disability.   | Supported              | The Department will consider ways to further promote and build on the participation of learning and support teachers in a range of professional learning opportunities. This includes Learning and Support sponsorships that are available to teachers to gain a Masters qualification in special education, of which more than 300 have been provided since 2012. More than 2,400 learning and support teacher participants have completed specialist professional learning courses in key areas of disability since 2012.   |
| 12. Examine and implement further strategies to help teachers meet the learning needs of students with autism and mental health conditions.   | Supported              | The Department will explore opportunities for developing further strategies to support teachers in meeting the learning and wellbeing needs of students with autism and mental health disorders.  |
| 13. Improve how it monitors the learning outcomes for students with disability, specifically: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- see how the School Excellence Framework can be used by schools to monitor and report on their overall performance in improving learning outcomes for students with disability</li> <li>- report on its success in improving the educational achievements of students with disability from a state-wide perspective.</li> </ul> | Supported in principle | <p>The Department's School Excellence Framework (SEF) introduced in 2015 is inclusive of all schools and students. Schools will use the SEF to develop their school plan, self-assess and report annually on their progress and have their self-assessment validated externally by an independent panel on a 5 year cycle. Students with disability are included in the SEF as one of a number of diverse learner groups. The SEF provides the foundation for the Department to strengthen monitoring and reporting on all students, including those with disability.</p> <p>Students with disability have a diverse range of types and levels of learning need and for this reason it is not practicable to report on students with disability as a cohort at a state level. While the majority of students with disability whose learning is impacted by disability are already</p> |

|  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
|  |  | <p>included in state level reporting on educational achievement, reflecting the personalised learning and support that they receive, it is problematic to report on these students as a cohort due to the range of adjustments to learning programs and outcomes to meet their individual needs, as required under the legislation. Students also come from a wide range of family and community contexts which may impact on their learning. The Department recognises the importance of monitoring and reporting on education outcomes for students with disability and will explore how this may be achieved in a meaningful way.</p> |
|--|--|--|

## Appendix 2: About the Audit

### Audit objective

This audit assessed how well the Department of Education is managing the transition to school for students with disability and supporting teachers to improve their educational outcomes.

### Audit scope and focus

The audit sought to answer the following questions:

1. Is the Department identifying and meeting the needs of students with disability when they transition to a new school?
2. Is the Department effectively supporting teachers to achieve their desired learning outcomes for students with disability?

### Audit criteria

For audit question 1 we checked whether:

- the Department provides adequate information and guidance on educational/schooling options for students with disability and their families
- schools ensure assessments are undertaken to identify the learning and support needs of students with disability
- schools provide appropriate adjustments and personalised learning and support for students with disability
- schools consult students with disability and their families on proposed adjustments and support.

For audit question 2 we checked whether:

- teachers have appropriate skills and training for teaching students with disability
- teachers have access to expert advice on teaching students with disability
- teachers have access to classroom support staff, where appropriate, to assist in the education of students with disability
- teachers have access to assistive technology, equipment or other tools needed for teaching students with disability
- schools and teachers monitor the educational outcomes of students with disability.

### Audit exclusions

We did not specifically assess:

- the advantages of mainstream education compared to special purpose schools
- the work of the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards
- the processes for transitioning young people with a disability from school to work
- the quality of the teaching/education degree coursework for teaching children with disabilities.

However, we may have commented on these issues/areas where they affect our findings or to provide context.

### Audit approach

Our performance audit methodology is designed to satisfy Australian Audit Standards ASAE 3500 on performance auditing. The Standard requires 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 the auditing requirements specified in the Public Finance and Audit Act 1983.

We collected evidence by:

- interviewing staff within the Department of Education who are responsible for coordinating and managing educational programs for students with disability
- interviewing school principals and teachers responsible for teaching students with disability
- interviewing key stakeholders and advocacy groups
- reviewing policies and procedures relating to teaching students with disability
- analysing agency data.

The audit team also examined approaches in other states and territories for best practice case studies.

### Fieldwork visits

We also visited 12 public schools. We based our selection on the following factors:

- location – schools in metropolitan and regional areas
- school level – primary and secondary schools
- schools with and without support classes
- socio-economic influences
- the prevalence of disability across NSW
- Aboriginal populations, who are estimated as twice as likely to be living with disability.

| Metropolitan school visits               | Regional school visits                  |
|--|---|
| Auburn North Public School               | Dubbo College Senior and South Campuses |
| Kingsgrove High School                   | Dubbo Public School                     |
| Lindfield East Public School             | Hamilton South Public School            |
| Mosman High School                       | Lambton High School                     |
| Liverpool West Public School             | Toronto High School                     |
| Peakhurst Public School                  |   |
| Sydney Secondary College, Balmain Campus |   |

We also spoke to other stakeholders, including:

- the Board of Studies Teaching and Educational Standards NSW
- Children and Young People with Disability Australia
- Family Advocacy
- Autism Community Network
- Disability Council of New South Wales
- NSW Teachers Federation Union
- NSW Treasury
- Department of Premier and Cabinet.

### Public consultation – online questionnaires

The audit team obtained additional feedback through a public survey on the Audit Office website. Two separate questionnaires were used to engage families of students with disability and school staff. We structured the questionnaires around the audit criteria. We received 883 responses to the staff survey and 302 responses to the family survey. Participation in the surveys was promoted through disability advocacy groups, the NSW Teachers Federation, the Board of Studies Teaching and Educational Standards NSW, and the Department’s newsletter to schools (‘SchoolBiz’).

**Acknowledgements**

We gratefully acknowledge the co-operation and assistance provided by the Department of Education. In particular we wish to thank our liaison officers and school staff who participated in interviews and provided material relevant to the audit.

We would also like to thank the community groups and other stakeholders that spoke to us during the audit.

**Audit team**

Neil Avery, Tiffany Blackett and Daksha Sridhar conducted the performance audit. Giulia Vitetta was the Engagement Reviewer.

**Audit cost**

Including staff costs and overheads, the estimated cost of the audit was \$345,646.

# Performance auditing

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## **What are performance audits?**

Performance audits determine whether an agency is carrying out its activities effectively, and doing so economically and efficiently and in compliance with all relevant laws.

The activities examined by a performance audit may include a government program, all or part of a government agency or consider particular issues which affect the whole public sector. They cannot question the merits of government policy objectives.

The Auditor-General's mandate to undertake performance audits is set out in the *Public Finance and Audit Act 1983*.

## **Why do we conduct performance audits?**

Performance audits provide independent assurance to parliament and the public.

Through their recommendations, performance audits seek to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of government agencies so that the community receives value for money from government services.

Performance audits also focus on assisting accountability processes by holding managers to account for agency performance.

Performance audits are selected at the discretion of the Auditor-General who seeks input from parliamentarians, the public, agencies and Audit Office research.

## **What happens during the phases of a performance audit?**

Performance audits have three key phases: planning, fieldwork and report writing. They can take up to nine months to complete, depending on the audit's scope.

During the planning phase the audit team develops an understanding of agency activities 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 agency or program activities are assessed. Criteria may be based on best practice, government targets, benchmarks or published guidelines.

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

The audit team then meets with agency management to check that facts presented in the draft report are accurate and that recommendations are practical and appropriate.

A final report is then provided to the CEO for comment. The relevant minister and the Treasurer are also provided with a copy of the final report. The report tabled in parliament includes a response from the CEO on the report's conclusion and recommendations. In multiple agency performance audits there may be responses from more than one agency or from a nominated coordinating agency.

## **Do we check to see if recommendations have been implemented?**

Following the tabling of the report in parliament, agencies are requested to advise the Audit Office on action taken, or proposed, against each of the report's recommendations. It is usual for agency audit committees to monitor progress with the implementation of recommendations.

In addition, it is the practice of Parliament's Public Accounts Committee (PAC) 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 tabled. These reports are available on the parliamentary website.

## **Who audits the auditors?**

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

Internal quality control review of each audit ensures compliance with Australian assurance standards. Periodic review by other Audit Offices tests our activities against best practice.

The PAC is also responsible for overseeing the performance of the Audit Office and conducts a review of our operations every four years. The review's report is tabled in parliament and available on its website.

## **Who pays for performance audits?**

No fee is charged for performance audits. Our 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 our website [www.audit.nsw.gov.au](http://www.audit.nsw.gov.au) or contact us on 9275 7100.

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