

Position Statement on the Dual System of Regular and Special Schools

The Centre for Inclusive Education (C4IE) is founded on an understanding that Inclusive Education is a fundamental human right that enables all other rights. The Centre exists to produce research that will reduce exclusion and increase inclusion to provide all children and young people with equitable opportunities to learn and develop as independent and valued human beings. Researchers from C4IE put forward this position paper in response to the ongoing government practice of promoting inclusive education yet continuing to resource segregated special schools for students with disability.

In 2018, the Queensland Department of Education announced its new Inclusive Education Policy. The policy was based upon a precise definition of inclusive education established under General Comment No. 4 (United Nations, 2016) on Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights for Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). However, after four years of policy implementation the Queensland Department of Education continues to support a dual track system by funding and developing both regular schools and special schools. New special schools continue to be built. It is the position of C4IE that this dual track system is effectively stalling successful implementation of the Queensland Inclusive Education Policy. Students with disability continue to experience discrimination, segregation, and lower educational outcomes.

This paper explains the position of C4IE on special (segregated) schools and why they must be phased out if we are to implement our obligations under the CRPD and the Queensland Inclusive Education Policy. Recommendations are offered as to how we can address societal, systemic, school and family factors to enable desegregation and progress inclusive schooling. We describe 3 reasons for the dismantling of segregated schooling: 1] compliance with international conventions and national laws and policies; 2] alignment with research evidence on best practice for students with disability; 3] views of people with disability.

International Conventions and Australian Laws and Policies

Internationally, the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of People with Disability* (UNCRPD) Article 24, General Comment No. 4 (GC4; United Nations, 2016) states that there is an obligation, “to move as expeditiously and effectively as possible” towards the realisation of the inclusive education rights of students with disability which, “is not compatible with sustaining two systems of education: mainstream and special/segregated education” ([United Nations, 2016, p. 13](#)). [The CRPD also makes clear that inclusive education pertains to a child’s rights above parental choice. The closing of special schools aligns with our obligations under the CRPD.](#)

Nationally, the Australian [Disability Standards for Education \(DSE\)](#) state that students with disability are entitled to enrol in their local school and access education on the same basis as their peers without disability. [The Australian Disability Strategy \(2021-2031\)](#) Policy Priority 2 is to build capability in the delivery of inclusive education to improve educational outcomes for school students with disability. The closing of special schools aligns with the DSE and the priorities of Australia's Disability Strategy.

In Queensland, the development of an award-winning Inclusive Education Policy and implementation strategy signalled the Queensland Government's clear commitment to progressing [inclusive education](#). However, there are now conflicting messages, policy confusion, and lack of transparency with respect to the four outcome measures by which the success of the policy was to be evaluated. A key conflicting message is delivered when the Queensland government continues to support segregated, special education by building new special schools and expanding existing special schools. This is incompatible with the stated aims of the 2018 Queensland Inclusive Education Policy and with Australia's obligation to implement systemic inclusive education reform.

Research evidence on best practice for students with disability

The assumption that children and young people with disability are better placed in special education settings is tenacious, but there is no evidence to support this belief ([Hehir et al., 2016](#)). Rather, evidence shows that placement in segregated special settings for children with disabilities has resulted in a marginalised population that has been institutionalised, undereducated, socially rejected, and excluded from society ([ACIE, 2020](#)). A conclusive body of evidence shows that inclusive education leads to positive academic and social emotional outcomes **for all students**, with and without disabilities ([De Bruin, 2020](#)).

The closure of special schools not only aligns with the research evidence but is the only conclusion that can be drawn from the growing body of academic literature about best educational practice for students with disability. We suggest that an inclusive approach to education should draw on the knowledge and skills of educators who have worked with students with disabilities. Special school and program staff have an important role in sharing their knowledge and developing collaborative planning and teaching practices to support inclusion. Access to specialist staff and multidisciplinary support is an important factor in supporting student diversity in schools. Governments committed to evidence-based practice must move swiftly from a dual system of regular and special schools to a unified education system for all students.

Views of People with Disability - Special Schools are not Special

Kurt Fearnley is an Australian Paralympian and a proud person with a disability. In a recent [podcast](#) titled "Are Australian schools inclusive? Let Us In!", Kurt said,

"Special schools - they are not special. I feel really uncomfortable with that term. Because we call them special schools to make ourselves feel comfortable. We need to tell it like it is. We need to use real language. It is a segregated education."

This message has been repeated many times by people with disability and their allies, for example in the 2021 World Down Syndrome Day video, [Not Special Needs](#), which satirises

ableist beliefs about people with intellectual disability. Their words echo those of the late great teacher Stella Young who said in her [TedTalk](#):

“The word 'special', as it is applied to disability, too often means 'a bit shit'.”

People with disability are clear that the time for “special” places for “special” people is over and C4IE supports them in their fight for a place in the mainstream of life. Celebration of diversity and inclusive lives is incompatible with special schools and the maintenance of a dual education system.

Moving Forward

Recently researchers from the [Centre for Inclusive Education Inclusion and Exclusion Program](#) conducted a number of research projects that focus on closing special schools. The [most recent paper](#) reports on our analysis of what is happening in Queensland with a focus on societal, systemic, school and family drivers for and barriers to progressing inclusion and moving away from segregated schooling. Our findings indicate where and why discrimination, segregation and exclusion remain strongly embedded in our society and education system.

It is clear that a dual system of mainstream and special schools is hindering the reform that is necessary to create an inclusive education system in Queensland. Special [segregated] schools, in and of themselves, remain a significant barrier to true inclusive education reform. We propose that desegregation must occur concurrently with systemic reform supporting inclusion so that all students can be genuinely included.

These propositions align with The Australian Coalition for Inclusive Education (ACIE) [roadmap](#) for achieving inclusive education in Australia that is underpinned by six pillars drawn from the CRPD, organised into two key sections: the outcomes that need to occur and the key levers for change.

The ACIE roadmap includes plans for short-term outcomes (1-2 years), medium-term outcomes (3-5 years), and long-term outcomes (5-10 years) with the final outcome being that segregated education no longer exists in Australia. We suggest that this roadmap could include improving leaders’ knowledge and capability to drive the [transformative leadership](#) of collaborative teamwork and change for inclusion and equity.

The foundation of an inclusive society is an inclusive education system. Through inclusive education, people with disability and people who do not have a disability all experience inclusion in the school years and forge a path to an inclusive future as adults. Inclusive education is a means for achieving social, economic, and cultural inclusion for individuals, and for achieving an inclusive society more broadly.

We call on the Queensland Government to commit to the closure of segregated, special schooling and to foreground a mandate for high-quality, authentic inclusive education, as defined in General Comment No. 4 (GC4, United Nations, 2016) on Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, United Nations, 2008) so that people with a disability of all ages can benefit from education and an inclusive society can be achieved.

References

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Members of The Centre for Inclusive Education (C4IE) at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) conduct high-quality research across four interlocking programs: (i) Curriculum and Learning, (ii), Inclusion and Exclusion, (iii) Health and Wellbeing. For more information about C4IE, its members and research outputs, please contact Lara Maia-Pike, C4IE Coordinator lara.maiapike@qut.edu.au or visit www.research.qut.edu.au/c4ie/

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