

Building staff capability

“We’re not going to trial any programs without some evidence of it being successful because we can’t even have one year of education being wasted for these students, particularly students with additional needs. We’ve got to catch them up, not have a year where we trial something when the evidence isn’t there.”

– Bentleigh West Primary School

Why is building staff capacity important?

All members of the school community deserve to feel valued and supported to fully participate, learn, develop and succeed within an inclusive school culture. This includes teachers and other staff.

For students with disability to get the most out of their education, staff must be provided with the right tools and supports. This includes policies, education programs, training, wellbeing and learning supports and physical resources.

“Schools are tough at the moment. There’s this weird kind of balance between needing almost like a short sharp fix to a problem facing a student that kind of has to run alongside our genuine desire to be better at our jobs.”

– Mt Eliza Secondary College



What the law says

Under the *Equal Opportunity Act 2010* (Vic), schools have a positive duty to take reasonable and proportionate steps to eliminate discrimination, sexual harassment and victimisation as far as possible.

This places an obligation on schools to ensure that teachers and other staff are aware of their obligations under the law and implement an inclusive culture so that students with disability can participate in their education on the same basis as students without a disability. This includes providing evidence-based professional learning for teachers to ensure the rights of students are addressed.

Other relevant laws that need to be considered include occupational health and safety laws, the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* (Cth), federal discrimination laws, and other education-related laws and policies.

“No matter who the student is or what disability they have, they’re catered for as best as possible. All staff are equipped to support these students, from really experienced staff through to very inexperienced staff. If they don’t know, they now actually seek and ask a leading teacher. If they don’t know the answer, they’ll then go and find the answer.”

– Rosebud Secondary College

What Department of Education policy says

Department of Education policy complements Victoria's discrimination and human rights laws, and should be read together for the benefit of all students and staff. Both legislation and policies must be considered when making decisions about inclusive education.

The Inclusive Classrooms professional learning program offers a suite of courses for school staff designed specifically for the Victorian education context. The courses focus on practical teaching strategies, adjustments and supports at the school, classroom and individual levels.



CASE STUDY

Background

After assessing potential risks around disability inclusion, a primary school principal identified the need for further professional development on inclusive education for the school's staff.

School's response

With the support of Department of Education's workforces with specialist expertise in inclusive education and working with learning specialists from both the Diverse Learning Hub and the Inclusive Outreach Coaching initiative, the school chose to focus on improving Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for their students with disability.

Specialists worked to upskill staff in setting SMART (Specific, Measurable, Agreed/Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) goals for each student and building understanding of the types of reasonable adjustments for different functional needs. Plans were also informed by department resources, such as the IEP quality checklist rubric, and courses under the Inclusive Classrooms professional learning program.

Having the process co-led by members of the leadership team, the assistant principal and later a Disability Inclusion Coordinator, was critical in ensuring that learning was applied across the whole school. In reflecting on the success of the process, the principal recommended revisiting staff knowledge and learning needs on a regular basis, in the same way the school would for its students, to ensure ongoing improvement.

"We've had teachers over the past few years that have come and said 'we'd really like to do this course' or 'we'd really like to that'. I've said, 'OK, can you go back to the provider and ask for the evidence?' They wrote to the providers and neither provider could give us any external peer reviewed evidence. We're not going to trial those on our kids. We know we have to be able to offer and make the best of the kids' time. They've got 7 years with us. It goes pretty quickly and we can't have a wasted couple of years of trying things. And we've got the results to match so we know it's working."

– Bentleigh West Primary School

Practical tips

These practical tips for building staff capacity have been informed by schools, for schools, to comply with their positive duty to eliminate discrimination and other legal obligations, and work towards full disability inclusion:

- Establish whole school processes and systems to make and embed school-wide improvements strengthening inclusive practices
- Set goals as part of the annual school planning process, including student learning and wellbeing targets based on school data
- Use evidence-based training programs
- Make the most of school processes such as Annual Implementation Plans
- Make senior staff available to answer questions or provide information to less experienced staff
- Consider mentorship and coaching programs so that staff can learn from one another
- Develop whole school processes for collaboration with external support providers
- Involve students and their families in the decision-making process, including whether they consider a particular adjustment, program or staff training will benefit them
- Ensure staff have access to, and feel comfortable using, wellbeing and learning support services
- Reinforce staff training by setting the expectation that professional development be applied in practice, for example by tracking goals within Professional Learning Communities or showcasing learning at a staff meeting.

“The best professional learning you can do is to sit down with the student and ask them about their education. They often know the answers. For example, they know if they feel a bit overwhelmed by noise. Students generally know what they need.”

– Mt Eliza Secondary College

Other supports and resources

Professional learning and development in schools | schools.vic.gov.au

Disability Inclusion: increased support for students with disabilities | schools.vic.gov.au

Inclusive Classrooms professional learning program | schools.vic.gov.au

Inclusive education for students with disabilities | vic.gov.au

Professional learning on supporting diverse learners | vic.gov.au

Disability Inclusion Funding and Support: Resources | education.vic.gov.au

Think Forward Blog | Forward Educators Resources | CAST

Guides & resources | Australian Education Research Organisation



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