



# Held back: the experience of students with disabilities in Victorian schools

## > What students told us

The Commission wanted to gather the views and experiences of students with disabilities in schools. However, we also wanted to make sure that students understood and consented to participate in our research. We decided to hear directly from students over the age of 13. This brochure sets out what students told us when they filled out our survey, attended a 'have a say' day or participated in our 'phone-in'.

### Who got involved?

Seventy students told us about their experiences at school. Sixty students filled out our survey. One student took part in the phone-in and the rest of the students took part in 'have a say' days.

The students had a range of disabilities including physical, sensory, and intellectual disabilities, mental health disorders, language disorders, illnesses and autism spectrum disorders. They also attended a range of schools including Catholic and Independent schools, and government mainstream and specialist schools.

### What did students tell us?

Students told us about good and bad experiences at school.

#### Participation

Most students (68.3 per cent) said that they were able to participate in class and at school events and excursions like everyone else. A few students said that they were very happy at their school.

Students told us that their schools made a range of adjustments to help them to participate. These included integration aides, extra time with teachers, learning programs suited to needs, extra time for exams, specialist staff like speech therapists and facilities like wheelchair ramps.

About a third of students who took our survey felt that they could not participate. When we asked why, they talked about problems they had with access to equipment (like laptops), adjustments (like captioning on television programs or films) with teachers and with other staff. Some felt that their teachers were

scared of their disability, and some felt misunderstood or even bullied. Some would have liked extra time or different formats for exams, time with aides and simpler explanations from their teachers.

**"Some teachers (while others are great) are scared by my epilepsy ... and rather I don't attend excursions or attend with my mum, which is an option I am NOT a fan of!"**

A few students mentioned that other students helped them to participate. They said that their friends were understanding and were happy to help.

#### Teachers

Over half of the students who took our survey (56 per cent) felt supported and looked after by their teachers.

We asked the other students why they did not feel supported and looked after. These students were clear that some teachers were great, but that others were unhelpful. Students were clear about the qualities of a great teacher. They told us about teachers who were helpful, accommodating, understanding and supportive. Students appreciated when teachers gave simple explanations and checked if they were struggling.

On the other hand, some students gave examples of teachers who were dismissive, unwilling to help, did not understand their disability, labelled them as 'lazy', or ignored or questioned their learning needs. A few students mentioned that their teachers were unwilling to attend training about their disability. A number of

deaf students said that some teachers showed films or television programs that did not have captions or interpreting.

A few students mentioned that it was difficult for their teachers to help, because they had so many demands on their time.

**“I can only write for very short periods of time so we requested if I could take notes on a laptop or have notes printed off for me so I could highlight the important parts and write down smaller bits of information. Some teachers were great and more than helpful, however others stated that they thought it promoted ‘laziness’.”**

## Being treated unfairly at school

Just under half the students we surveyed (46 per cent) said that they had been treated unfairly at school.

Some students gave examples of being treated unfairly by their teachers. These included lack of adjustments in the classroom or exams, being spoken to rudely, missing out on activities like camps and excursions, and being excluded or isolated in the classroom. One student had been restrained and bruised, and another had seen a classmate locked in a room by teachers.

## Bullying and harassment at school

Almost two thirds of students (63 per cent) had experienced bullying or harassment at school.

This included being teased or called names (including online) and being pushed around. A few students reported very serious physical assaults.

## Suspensions and expulsions

Only a few students had been suspended or expelled. A few said that they had been expelled for fighting, bullying other students or ‘wagging’. A few mentioned that the incident came out of misunderstanding around their disability.

## Needing more help

Sixty per cent of students we surveyed said that they needed more help from their school.

Many wanted help from their teachers. Some wanted extra time with teachers, and a few wanted their teachers to have a better understanding of their disability. One wanted more help with handling bullying. One student wanted more academically stimulating work at their special school, although they acknowledged that this was difficult for their teachers in a class of mixed intellectual abilities.

Other students wanted help from support staff, including time with aides, social workers, occupational therapists, interpreters and physiotherapists. Some students mentioned particular things they needed help with, such as homework, work experience and social inclusion.

Some students said that equipment, such as laptops or ergonomic chairs, would be helpful.

## What do students want?

Based on our survey, we think students want:

- to be safe and happy at school
- teachers who support and understand them
- learning methods that suit their needs and build on their strengths
- opportunities to use new technology to assist their learning
- support to participate in the whole of school life – from the classroom to excursions, camps, career planning and the social side of school.

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Were these resources useful? Easy to use? Would you like to see something else included? Please email us at [communications@veohrc.vic.gov.au](mailto:communications@veohrc.vic.gov.au).

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