

## Taskforce on Students with Learning Difficulties

### Final Report

Ms Joy Burch MLA  
Minister for Education and Training  
ACT Legislative Assembly  
London Circuit  
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Minister

I am pleased to submit the report on behalf of the Taskforce on Students with Learning Difficulties. The Taskforce commends the ACT Government for providing the opportunity to consider the way forward to improve the learning outcomes of students with learning difficulties. The recommendations and strategies presented in this report provide a strong clearly articulated direction to build on the already high standard of professional practice in ACT public schools. They present a whole of ACT Education and Training Directorate approach to support students with learning difficulties. The Taskforce report presents three key messages:

- a consistent systematic approach to learning difficulties,
- building the capacity of staff in the area of learning difficulties and
- partnerships with families in supporting students with learning difficulties.

The recommendations and strategies that support these messages acknowledge the range of learning difficulties that present in any classroom from preschool to year 12. In addressing assessment and support for students the recommendations emphasise the need for all teachers and school leaders to develop and demonstrate understanding and knowledge to meet the needs of students with learning difficulties.

I would like to thank the members of the Taskforce for their expertise and commitment in providing a way forward for students with learning difficulties. The Taskforce thanks and acknowledges the significant contributions provided by teachers and leaders within the ACT Education and Training Directorate and the valuable input provided by parents and carers and students during the consultation process.

The Taskforce envisages the outcome of the report will be that the appropriate resources are allocated for the education of students with learning difficulties. In presenting its findings, the Taskforce encourages the Minister to ensure the full educational potential and wellbeing of young people with learning difficulties are addressed as a matter requiring serious and timely attention.

Yours sincerely

Irene Lind  
Chair, Taskforce on Students with Learning Difficulties

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## Processes of the Taskforce

The Taskforce on Students with Learning Difficulties (Taskforce) met on seven occasions and participated in an additional training session introducing the online professional learning modules being delivered to teachers. In addition to papers and presentations at meetings, readings and references were circulated for consideration between meetings. Presentations were delivered to the Taskforce by Taskforce members, ACT Education and Training Directorate (Directorate) officers and by an interstate expert presenter (Appendix 2).

Five consultation sessions were held with Directorate officers during March and April 2013. This enabled consultation with specialist groups including 18 Literacy and Numeracy Field Officers, 43 school psychologists (also referred to as school counsellors by families and teachers). In addition to sessions for teachers, Learning Support Assistants and school leaders from all sectors, one school completed individual teacher consultations and two schools submitted whole school consultation comments.

A consultation session was held for parents and carers and students on 6 May 2013, with 39 parents/carers and 21 students registering. The two groups worked separately with students providing individual input to trained teacher facilitators. An online survey was available for parents and carers and 56 responses were received. The Taskforce email address was available for individual responses. (Appendix 2) All input to the Taskforce was treated anonymously and responses added greatly to enriching the knowledge and perspectives of Taskforce members and to informing this report. In addition, a submission from Speech Pathology Australia was received and tabled for consideration.

## Issues

During the work of the Taskforce the following issues were noted as significant in understanding the background to learning difficulties.

1. The use of **inconsistent terminology** added to the complexity of the work of the Taskforce. Nationally and internationally, learning disability, specific learning disability, learning difficulty and to a lesser extent learning disorder and learning difference are used to describe the same things and also different things. Prevalence rates therefore vary due to differing definitions. There has been little debate around the definition in Australia and the inconsistent use of the terms learning disabilities and learning difficulties is a significant issue for educators and families. Until the issue of terminology is resolved, ambiguity and resultant implications for support remain, as does clarity concerning the definition in respect to the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA) and the Disability Standards for Education 2005.

***The Taskforce worked with the learning difficulties terminology provided to it in the Terms of Reference*** (Appendix 1). The following definitions are indicative of the inconsistency the Taskforce encountered.

Skues, Everarda and Cunningham (2011), conclude “there is a lack of clarity and agreement in the field regarding the definition of learning disabilities” and state that researchers agree “that students with learning disabilities demonstrate specific learning problems despite having at least average intelligence” (p.160). Their inspection of the definitions reveals common elements across definitions, in particular information processing problems that influence the acquisition and effective use of one or more language skills, including listening, reading, spelling, writing and /or mathematical skills.

The Government of South Australia Department of Education and Child Development (2013) definition states “Learning difficulties is a general term which refers to children or students who experience difficulties with their learning. Learning disabilities is a term used for learners with average or above average intelligence who exhibit developmental and academic skills that are *significantly* below expectation for their age and general ability.” They specifically describe dyslexia – reading, dyscalculia – mathematics, dysgraphia - written expression, dysphasia - oral language, and nonverbal learning disorder.

Author and researcher Richard Lavoie (2013) writes “Children with learning disabilities exhibit a wide range of symptoms. These include problems with reading, mathematics, comprehension, writing, spoken language, or reasoning abilities. Hyperactivity, inattention and perceptual coordination also may be associated with learning disabilities but are not learning disabilities themselves. The primary characteristic of a learning disability is a significant difference between a child's achievement in some areas and his or her overall intelligence.”

The Learning Difficulties Coalition states that the term “learning difficulties” relates to “significant and unusual difficulties in the acquisition and use of one or more of the following areas: listening, speaking, reading, writing and mathematical skills”. Learning difficulties may be associated with a diagnosed primary condition such as an attention problem (AD/HD) or a communication disorder (Specific Language Impairment) or a pervasive developmental disorder (e.g. Aspergers Syndrome).

The Australian Government response to recommendations of the Dyslexia Working Party Report (2011) states that, “The Australian Government does not have a national body responsible for determining universal definitions”. Instead, definitions are adopted or developed by different departments or statutory bodies for distinctive purposes, for example, for eligibility for a program, intervention or payment.” (p.1)

**2.**Inconsistent definitions have resulted in **data collection being extremely difficult**. The Council of Australian Governments is working on a model for collecting nationally consistent data on school students with a disability. It consists of an agreed process to include in the data collection those

students who receive an adjustment because there is documented evidence that the student has a disability under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (DDA). The DDA includes a legal definition of disability which is included in the *Disability Standards for Education 2005*, along with guidelines for reasonable adjustment.

The Western Australian Government website cites Australian research indicating that approximately 20 per cent of children experience learning difficulties. Within this range, approximately 3.5 per cent are seen as having a specific learning disability which can be characterised by being ongoing persistent (2-3 years) and resistant to interventions. Diagnosed Learning Disabilities include: ADHD, Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, Dysgraphia and Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD)”.

Skues and Cunningham (2011) cite prevalence rates for learning disabilities as varying from 5 to over 15% depending on the definition, identification criteria and measures used. (p159) Rose (2009) cites the Snowling 2008 report estimating that dyslexia affects the literacy attainment rate of between 4% and 8% of children (p11). Westwood (2008) also acknowledges various researchers who argue different incidence rates and highlights this problem.

The organisation AUSPELD – supporting people with learning disabilities, estimates that at least 20% of Australian children are currently struggling with learning difficulties and 3 percent to 5 percent of students are known to have a developmental learning disability. Of those students identified with a learning disability, four out of every five are assessed as having a reading disorder (or reading disability), commonly known as dyslexia.

**3. The wide range of learning difficulties** that could be addressed by the Terms of Reference meant specific attention was not given to individual learning difficulties by the Taskforce. The Taskforce recognised that learning difficulties are multi-faceted and multidimensional. The Taskforce found that the amount of readily available information on some areas such as dyslexia was greater than for other learning difficulties. The Taskforce was aware that students can be twice exceptional meaning some gifted and talented students also have learning difficulties. Learning difficulties may also be associated with a diagnosed condition such as an attention disorder (AD/HD).

**4. Scientific research** regarding the brain and learning is progressing rapidly. The implications of this new knowledge need to be incorporated into educators’ ongoing learning to meet the needs of students with learning difficulties.

**5. The scope of the Taskforce did not incorporate more specialist interventions** for learning difficulties as the focus was on the responsibilities of the Directorate and the work of schools. Specialist interventions could include medical diagnosis and treatments. All additional evidence based information that parents and carers provide to schools should be comprehensively considered in making adjustments for the student.

## **Recommendations - at a glance**

Recommendations - at a glance are provided as a very brief overview of the considered findings in the report. The report includes a full explanation of the recommendations .

### **A Consistent Systemic Approach**

The embedding of a consistent and systemic approach to maximise the specific learning outcomes of students with learning difficulties is recommended.

The approach needs to build high-level understanding of learning difficulties across the Directorate, including the skills needed to implement strategies and make adjustments.

### **Building Staff Capacity**

The development of a strategy to build the capacity of staff to meet the needs of students with learning difficulties is recommended.

Development of this strategy in partnership with school leadership will ensure whole of Directorate ownership and practices.

### **Partnerships with Families**

Consistent communication and support processes across the Directorate, and between schools and families, will support effective partnerships that improve outcomes for students with learning difficulties.

## **The Way Forward - at a glance**

The Way Forward - at a glance provides the directions identified by the Taskforce to enable the Directorate to progress the three recommendations They are provided as a summary and should be considered in respect to the whole report.

### **A Consistent Systemic Approach**

- The Taskforce endorses the **development of protocols** that include identifying, supporting and making adjustments for students with learning difficulties as a positive strategy to establishing a systematic consistent approach across the Directorate.

- The Taskforce notes that the Directorate’s Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2009 - 2013 does not currently include specific approaches. The addition of **endorsed evidenced based approaches** would provide a consistent and supportive platform in the teaching of literacy and numeracy. Articulating the needs of students with learning difficulties within the strategy would support school based interventions which aim to enhance student outcomes.
- The Taskforce recognises that educational change needs to be led by **informed school leaders**, and proposes that a focus on learning difficulties and diversity in learning be considered as a key component of the Directorate’s leadership program from 2014.
- The Taskforce notes that students who are **twice exceptional** are not identified in the current Directorate’s Gifted and Talented Policy. The inclusion of how to meet the needs of these students would acknowledge that learning difficulties are apparent across the full range of students in mainstream classes.
- The Taskforce identifies that positive gains are being achieved for students with learning difficulties through **Response to Intervention Models** and proposes that the Directorate further investigates possible models and the support needed to implement them within ACT public schools.

## **Building Staff Capacity**

- The Taskforce identifies that a **comprehensive professional learning pathway** with increasing levels of specialist knowledge would support a consistent systematic approach to learning difficulties across the Directorate.
- The Taskforce proposes that **targets for completion of training** would ensure that a pathway of expertise is established to embed knowledge in all sectors of the Directorate, and across leadership of the Directorate.
- The Taskforces recognises that **teachers need scaffolding and support** from teachers with greater expertise in learning difficulties and proposes that each School Network is supported by officers with specialist skills in learning difficulties.
- The Taskforce recognises the need for **systemic professional learning for all Learning Support Assistants** working in the area of learning difficulties. Clarification of the role of these officers would assist communication within schools and between schools and families.

- The Taskforce identifies that a system wide approach to **the assessment of students with learning difficulties** needs to be investigated and determined.

### **Partnerships with Families**

- The Taskforce proposes the development by the Directorate of **multiple communication mechanisms** that include consistent information to support families of students with learning difficulties (such as a flowchart of support, booklets, website information from the Directorate linking to helpful external websites and organisations).
- The Taskforce recognises that **enhanced partnerships with therapists** and other professionals working with teachers, parents and directly with students, can improve the outcomes of students with learning difficulties and proposes that this should be investigated.
- The Taskforce notes that provisions **for adjustment to assessment** tools for students with learning difficulties need to be strongly promoted to parents and carers, students and staff. This includes Board of Secondary Schools Studies (BSSS) requirements, ACT Scaling Test (AST) and National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN).

## **A Consistent Systemic Approach**

**The embedding of a consistent and systemic approach to maximise the specific learning outcomes of students with learning difficulties is recommended.**

**The approach needs to build high level understanding of learning difficulties across the Directorate including the skills needed to implement strategies and make adjustments.**

*“Consistent knowledge across the Directorate so we can speak the same language about students - teacher “*

*“Endorsed approaches and programs –school leader”*

*“In high schools learning difficulties can manifest as behavioural problems. The behaviour problems are dealt with, not the underlying difficulty – high school teacher”*

*“When I can’t do my work I get angry and I get sent out, then I am behind and have to start again –student”*

*“If she tells me too many things it scrambles in my brain and everything disappears – student”*

*“I have 50 ideas in my head and none get on paper. The ideas are gone before I can write it down –not really sure if the teacher understands this. –student”*

*“Sometimes when I have to read it from the board I get embarrassed and I can’t read it properly. Worksheets are hard to read. ...I find it hard to understand what the maths problem is asking me. Can’t remember all the steps the teacher asks me to do when I have to write. – student”*

*“We understand that a teacher has a class full of students however there are often small changes they can make which have a big impact on the child – parent”*

**The Taskforce acknowledges** and commends the Directorate for the initiatives they are undertaking in the area of learning difficulties. These include the online professional development modules on Speech and Language, Dyslexia and Significant Reading Difficulties, Disabilities Standards, and the package Understanding Learning Difficulties Practice Guidelines, developed by the counselling section, for use with schools. Consultation sessions with teachers highlighted a range of individual school level initiatives that support students with learning difficulties including, but not limited to, explicit teaching strategies, case management, effective special needs mechanisms, small group and 1:1 tuition, student data tracking and analysis, and specific teaching programs. Partnerships with Therapy ACT, especially in the area of speech pathology, were also recognised as very effective but the availability of the service was found to be very limited.

The Taskforce strongly advises that, regardless of what ACT public school a student attends or the stage of education of a student, a consistent systemic approach to meeting their learning needs is required. Mechanisms for early identification are needed and intervention should occur as soon as

the learning difficulty manifests, to prevent lost learning opportunities. The need for consistent practice and Directorate leadership in this area were evident to the Taskforce.

**Directorate documentation:** Meeting the needs of individual students is reflected in Directorate documentation. *Everyone matters ACT Department of Education and Training Strategic Plan 2010 - 2013* states that every student will be engaged in learning through a *personalised approach* and that a priority is to “*ensure young people’s learning needs are met*”. *The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2009 – 2013* is a comprehensive document that clearly identifies addressing the diverse needs and abilities of students and presents clear guidelines including school based strategic resource allocation actions.

Students who are gifted and talented and who also have learning difficulties are not identified in the Directorate’s current Gifted and Talented Policy. The inclusion of how to meet the needs of these students would acknowledge that learning difficulties are apparent across the full range of students in mainstream classes.

Inclusivity for students with learning difficulties means each school “embraces the idea that since everyone is an individual, we need to organise schools, teaching and learning so that each student has the learning experience that ‘fits’” (Inclusivity Challenge, p.3).

Identifying and supporting students with learning difficulties is not specifically articulated in Directorate documentation. No specific guidelines or protocols are documented regarding what are learning difficulties, and what support and level of adjustment is to be provided by schools. The Directorate is currently working on an ACT Engaging Schools Framework, a revised Strategic Plan and a number of policy reviews. The Taskforce sees an opportunity to reinforce the key understanding of the diverse learning needs of students with learning difficulties through explicitly recognising learning difficulties in overarching, as well as through comprehensive discrete documents, such as protocols for learning difficulties. This would include, but not be limited to, students experiencing language disorders, comprehension and processing disorders, dyslexia-related issues and significant difficulties in general numeracy and literacy.

Currently, individual schools and individual teachers may develop knowledge and skills, and implement a range of effective strategies and literacy and numeracy approaches for students with learning difficulties. This was evident in the data collected from consultation sessions. Without a systemic strategy to develop this knowledge, from preschool to year 12, appropriate practices are inconsistent and not embedded into daily teaching. Consequently, parents and carers cannot engage in constructive partnerships with schools, using common understandings of how children can be supported: neither can teachers work collaboratively with common core knowledge. Parent and carer consultation revealed that families encounter lack of consistency, within schools and between schools, in respect to knowledge, acceptance of learning difficulties and responses to learning difficulties.

The following exemplars of policy guidelines articulate beliefs and expectations and were noted by the Taskforce;

- *Province of British Columbia Supporting Students with Learning Disabilities A Guide for Teachers September 2011 and*
- *Assisting Students with Learning Difficulties NSW Education and Communities*

The majority of responses from teachers and school leaders stated that they wanted a consistent Directorate approach with information on teaching approaches, intervention strategies, levels of adjustments, identification tools, and resources. The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development use the strategy of website links to provide teachers with information to build their knowledge and understanding of reading difficulties and dyslexia.

**School Leadership:** The Taskforce identifies that informed school leadership is critical in developing and supporting improved outcomes for students with learning difficulties. Engaging leaders in building their knowledge and understanding is seen by the Taskforce as an immediate priority.

Dr John Munro (2005), from the University of Melbourne, is specific on the critical and ultimate responsibility of leaders in the area of learning difficulties, posing the question to school leaders:

*How does your school identify and support students with literacy learning difficulties?*

He states the ultimate responsibility lies with the leadership of a school. The school leadership team needs to have a school-wide strategy and the ability to lead the school to build staff capacity to engage in professional learning.

School leaders need to understand the scope of learning difficulties and that students with learning difficulties are not able to demonstrate their full potential without appropriate support. Successful programs rely on the leadership of a strong school leader who has budgetary power and the ability to bring all educators to the same table, to share professional development, approaches, time, space, money, and curriculum resources. Strong leaders can overcome barriers by keeping the focus on the students being helped. [www.nasponline.org/advocacy](http://www.nasponline.org/advocacy)

Support for students with learning difficulties occurs in school environments where, leadership values inclusivity and the concept of diversity in learning is the norm. "Diversity is the norm" is a platform being implemented by schools to meet specific additional needs of students within Catholic Education Parramatta. "This work is complex and is best done when teachers collaborate with each other, with specialist teachers within the learning support team, and with *school leaders* to plan how their students' needs can be met. Central to this team approach is collaboration with teachers and

leaders working and learning together on real and often complex issues”

(<http://www.stjohnvianneysdoonside.catholic.edu.au/student-support>)

**Tiered teaching strategy:** Research (Vaughn and Fuchs, 2003) identifies the benefits of a systematic approach to improving outcomes of students with learning difficulties. It involves

- early identification
- using data to inform decisions
- early intervention
- a tiered teaching strategy, where students receive additional explicit teaching in their areas of need.

Response to Intervention (RTI) or a “three wave model” includes a tiered response predicated on a first tier of exemplary, quality classroom instruction. The National Centre on Responses to Intervention uses levels to refer to the three prevention foci with the scope for more than one intervention in each level.

RTI is a process designed to ensure that students are receiving responsive, high-quality instruction according to their needs, as determined by regular benchmark assessment. Identifying students who need corrective intervention and delivering specific learning supports requires teacher skill development. RTI approaches are designed to facilitate collaboration and shared responsibilities among classroom teachers, teachers with a higher level of expertise in the area of working with children who have additional needs, such as teachers of English language learners, and inclusive technology support officers. RTI uses universal screening and progress monitoring to measure if interventions are working at each tier and to guide decisions. (National Centre on Response to Intervention April 2010)

The Early Action for Success Strategy from the NSW Government identifies a three tiered approach with the key features of:

*Tier 1: personalised learning delivered through classroom teaching for all students*

*Tier 2: individual and small group interventions by a class teacher or specialist for targeted students*

*Tier 3: intensive, personalised specialist assessment and intervention for students in the targeted group with more complex literacy and/or numeracy needs [www.schools.nsw.edu.au](http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au)*

In Western Australia the Learning Difficulties team provides advice on diagnostic assessments and strategies appropriate for teachers of students with learning disabilities. Consistent with current Australian and international research, this is achieved through a model which includes literacy and

numeracy response to intervention in primary schools and literacy in secondary schools. It consists of:

- a three wave RTI model for primary schools with high quality classroom teaching for all, small group intervention for some and individual instruction for a smaller group
- a two wave model for secondary schools with high quality classroom teaching for all followed by small group and individual intervention.

The Taskforce endorses the concept of early intervention and a tiered support model in both literacy and numeracy, as it requires ongoing evaluation of what is working and then appropriate adjustments to the interventions.

Success for a student with learning difficulties does not mean the difficulty disappears, it means that the student is supported to make effective use of strengths and compensatory strategies. Even with the benefit of early intervention, many students with learning difficulties will need additional scaffolding, support and adjustments through their educational pathways. This reinforces the need for all teachers, preschool to year 12, to have capacity to work effectively with students with learning difficulties.

Consideration needs to be given to withdrawal models, especially in secondary settings, where adolescents want help to be provided discreetly but still need sufficient intensity, frequency and duration to have real benefit (Klassen and Lynch, 2007).

The Taskforce notes that students may display behavioural issues that mask their learning difficulty. If the underlying learning difficulty is not identified and addressed, not only do students miss valuable learning time but the risk increases for these students not completing their education and therefore post school options are limited.

**Adjustments:** ACT public schools are required to make appropriate and reasonable adjustments for all students. This requires teachers to understand the need for adjustments based on equity of access to education. Queensland Education Department website states “adjustments are the changes, supports or modifications that can be made to enable all students to learn and demonstrate: what they know; and what they can do with what they know”. Some adjustments may be necessary throughout a student's educational career, while other adjustments may only be needed for a short period of time.

Western Australia Education Department recognises adjustments in the areas of:

- appropriate technology or specialised equipment
- differentiated curriculum
- use of small groups for explicit teaching
- education assistant time to support the teacher to support the student
- alternative methods of assessment or special examination arrangements.

Queensland Education Department includes resources in their adjustment description, and additional time to complete work and assessment is recognised in other literature. A comprehensive range of practical suggestions for Instructional, Curriculum and Environmental Adjustments are identified in [www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/StudentDiversity/Pdf/StudentDiversity](http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/StudentDiversity/Pdf/StudentDiversity) (2013)

The Taskforce encourages School Networks to share effective evidence-based adjustments as a priority. At the consultation sessions, parents and carers, students and teachers identified a range of adjustments, including assistive technologies, which they thought were effective. However, online survey responses from parents and carers recorded an 81.8% response rate to receiving limited support and adjustment for their child's learning difficulty.

Inclusive Technologies emphasises the use of technologies in the classroom as part of the day to day routine. Assistive technology is any technology that supports the student's communication, cognitive, physical and/or learning needs. The technology can be *low tech* such as a pencil grip, *medium tech* such as specific software on a standard computer; or *high tech* such as a communication device. For example, a note taking device is accepted as a "pencil"; a text reader is accepted as a voice.

The Taskforce notes that Inclusive Technology support is provided in the Disability Education Section of the Directorate. There is no designated Inclusive Technology support to assist teachers with assistive technology for students with learning difficulties. While assistive technologies can benefit all students with learning difficulties, particular consideration needs to be given to using these technologies with secondary students who are sometimes resistant to other adjustments and interventions.

A variety of responses were received regarding the use of **Individual Learning Plans (ILPs)** which are also referred to as Individual Education Plans or Personalised Learning Plans, as effective adjustments. At consultation sessions, some teachers reported that ILPs were very effective in targeting support for students and that ILP meetings opened up opportunities for sharing information between home and school. When plans have SMART (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable

**Realistic, Timely**) goals and are reviewed regularly with parents and carers, teachers and students, they are considered valuable. Parents and carers expressed some concerns with the lack of development, resourcing, implementation and review of ILPs for students with learning difficulties.

## **The way forward**

- The Taskforce endorses the **development of protocols** that include identifying, supporting and making adjustments for students with learning difficulties as a positive strategy to establishing a systematic, consistent approach across the Directorate.
- The Taskforce notes that the Directorate's Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2009 - 2013 does not currently include specific approaches. The **addition of endorsed evidenced based approaches** would provide a consistent and supportive platform in the teaching of literacy and numeracy. Articulating the needs of students with learning difficulties within the strategy would support school based interventions which aim to enhance student outcomes.
- The Taskforce recognises that educational change needs to be led by **informed school leaders**, and proposes that a focus on learning difficulties and diversity in learning be considered as a key component of the Directorate's leadership program from 2014.
- The Taskforce notes that students who are **twice exceptional** are not identified in the current Directorate's Gifted and Talented Policy. The inclusion of how to meet the needs of these students would acknowledge that learning difficulties are apparent across the full range of students in mainstream classes.
- The Taskforce identifies that positive gains are being achieved for students with learning difficulties through **Response to Intervention Models** and proposes that the Directorate further investigates possible models and the support needed to implement them within ACT public schools.

## **Building Staff Capacity**

**The development of a strategy to build the capacity of staff to meet the needs of students with learning difficulties is recommended. Development of this strategy in partnership with school leadership will ensure whole of Directorate ownership and practices.**

*“Teachers need deep understandings of learning difficulties and strategies to support diagnosed and undiagnosed –parent”*

*“Identified personnel that are trained to provide classroom teachers with additional expertise-teacher”*

*“Professional learning for all teachers – teacher”*

*“Network based learning difficulties support teams – school leaders”*

*“Tiered approach to expertise in schools and networks, all teachers need some training, then next level need more, top level need a lot. – teacher”*

**The Taskforce commends** individual teachers and schools who are participating in programs to increase their capacity to support students with learning difficulties. For example, at the end of April 2013, 200 participants had completed or were currently studying Speech, Language and Communication and or Dyslexia and Significant Reading Difficulties courses including 26 trained tutors. An additional 13 tutors completed the Tutor Training in May.

The Taskforce notes the important role the facilitator of the online courses plays in supporting participants in the above courses through online forums, face to face discussion and direction to additional resources. The Taskforce believes that without facilitator resourcing, the online courses will not be embedded effectively.

The Taskforce notes that professional learning in learning difficulties is currently undertaken voluntarily and not in a systemic way that increases the whole of Directorate expertise.

Research examined by the Taskforce indicated that Australian teachers receive little or no formal training in learning difficulties and most do not receive sufficient in-service training. In consultation sessions, teachers stated professional learning, time and more resourcing were key issues for them in meeting the needs of students with learning difficulties. They confirmed that their preservice training in the area was nil or minimal. Westwood states that “many teachers do not feel confident or competent to meet the needs of students with learning difficulties and tend to blame students for problems in learning” (p1).

As stated in the Australian Charter for the Professional Learning of Teachers and School Leaders, improving student outcomes is the ultimate goal of all teachers and school leaders and of the professional learning they undertake. National Teaching Standard 6.4 articulates clearly the

requirement of teachers to: *“Undertake professional learning programs designed to address identified student learning needs”*

**The classroom teacher:** The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers define the work of teachers and make explicit the elements of high quality, effective teaching in 21<sup>st</sup> century schools, which result in improved educational outcomes for students. The Standards state that teachers need to meet the specific learning needs of students and engage and support all students. (Standard 1.5, 4.1) In consultation sessions, teachers and leaders identified that implementation of the Standards required additional knowledge and support to work with students with learning difficulties.

From 2007 to 2010, teachers in ACT public schools received intensive whole of school professional learning in the three dimensions of the Quality Teaching model. The three dimensions of intellectual quality, quality learning environment and significance, represent classroom practices that have been linked to improved student outcomes, including for students with learning difficulties in mainstream classes. The Quality Teaching model emphasises explicit teacher instructions, modelling of what is expected, exemplars of the work expected and clear timely feedback to students. Teachers with this background in implementing Quality Teaching are well placed to take on new learning in learning difficulties. They will recognise that many of the strategies for improving the learning of students with learning difficulties will assist all students.

*“Given that LDs (Learning Difficulties) are a mainstream classroom issue in Australian schools, it is essential that classroom teachers are aware that some of their students have permanent learning problems so that appropriate assistance can be provided to students in classrooms”.* (Skues et al. P.169)

The role of the teacher is recognised by Dr Ken Rowe (2006) as pivotal to identifying and supporting students with learning difficulties. “It is argued that since teachers are the most valuable resource available to schools, an investment in teacher professionalism is vital by ensuring that they are equipped with an evidence – based repertoire of pedagogical skills that are effective in meeting the development and learning needs of *all* students”(p.99).

Emeritus Professor Tony Shaddock (2009) confirms this view, “While systems, schools, parents and students contribute to student learning in essential ways, what classroom teachers actually do - *how* and *what they teach* – has a singular effect on student learning. Consequently, it would be appropriate to give an absolute priority to improving the knowledge, skills, attitudes and commitment of classroom teachers in all settings” (p. 132).

All teachers are teachers of literacy and all teachers need to know how to scaffold student learning and organisational skills. To work effectively with the full range of learning difficulties, all teachers require knowledge in identifying where the student is having difficulty, how to differentiate learning for groups and individuals, what interventions can be tried, how to make and monitor appropriate adjustments to their teaching, to student tasks and assessment. Adjustments may also include

provisions included in the Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and ACT Scaling Test (AST).

**Teachers with additional expertise:** In consultation sessions, teachers identified the need for colleagues with additional high level expertise in learning difficulties to support the work of mainstream classroom teachers.

ACT public schools are supported by Literacy and Numeracy Field Officers. In June 2013 there were 12 Primary Literacy and Numeracy Field Officers, 4 Low SES Field Officers and 5 High School Literacy Field Officers employed by the Directorate.

This model does not provide Literacy and Numeracy Field Officer expertise to every ACT public school. Although highly skilled, these officers also identified strongly through consultation their need for capacity building in the area of learning difficulties. ACT public schools are allocated resources on an enrolment and needs basis for literacy and numeracy school based coordinator positions. The role and time allocation of these officers is determined at school level and varies considerably between schools. Opportunity exists for the role of these officers to be strengthened to work with greater expertise in the area of learning difficulties.

Models examined by the Taskforce advocate a targeted approach to professional learning that builds increasing levels of expertise. The more highly trained teachers take on a role within whole school initiatives, such as response to intervention models, to improve outcomes for students with learning difficulties. The UK independent report from Sir Jim Rose (2009 p. 56) advocates a three level approach to teacher capacity building in the area of learning difficulties

- *core skills for all teachers*
- *advanced knowledge for some teachers in all schools and*
- *specialist knowledge by some teachers who share this across local schools.*

The Taskforce strongly endorses an approach that recognises the need for increasing levels of teacher knowledge. Consideration needs to be given to ensure all teachers have expertise in the area of learning difficulties, each school has teachers with additional expertise, and teachers have access to specialist teacher advisors across their School Networks. Leadership teams and teachers with additional expertise in each school will drive the embedding of a consistent approach providing support to teachers and students particularly in response to more complex learning difficulties. These teachers will be available to coach and mentor all teachers in the area of learning difficulties.

The Taskforce argues that teachers with more specialised expertise in learning difficulties would be highly beneficial within the School Network Engagement Teams. This is particularly in the period the Directorate is prioritising learning difficulties by embedding it in documentation, professional learning and practice. This smaller number of highly skilled teachers in the area of learning

difficulties will be critical in sharing, coordinating and extending Network and whole of Directorate expertise. Attention needs to be given to how teachers with expertise in inclusive technologies can contribute as part of a team of specialists in learning difficulties.

A positive holistic strategy for consideration would be Literacy and Numeracy Field Officers, school based literacy and numeracy coordinators and Executive Teachers Professional Practice working in conjunction with school psychologists to provide ongoing professional learning and support to teachers.

**Professional learning:** The Taskforce notes that professional learning currently offered by the Directorate in learning difficulties is centred on language and literacy, however more is available to support dyslexia than writing difficulties such as dysgraphia. Broadening the focus and including significant numeracy difficulties such as dyscalculia, is seen as a next step. Professional learning offered by the Directorate currently includes Disability Standards training, online modules in Speech and Language, Dyslexia and Significant Reading Difficulties, and programs through the Literacy and Numeracy Section and the programs provided by Therapy ACT. The Taskforce identified the need for additional professional learning that includes:

- relevant evidence- based brain research on learning
- overview of learning difficulties and their identification, strategies for explicit teaching, differentiation and adjustment
- specific programs on identification of learning difficulties
- programs specifically addressing numeracy learning difficulties including dyscalculia
- advanced training in specific learning difficulties
- opportunities including scholarships for specialist study in learning difficulties.

The benefit of teachers, school psychologists, therapists and Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) learning together in some programs was identified in teacher comments.

**Identification and assessment:** The most important reason for assessing learning difficulties is for effective educational intervention, including appropriate adjustments. A wide range of opinions on the benefit of a diagnosis were evident to the Taskforce.

Teachers can be trained to **identify** characteristics of a learning difficulty. **Assessments** that give a diagnosis are different from identification and require specialist qualifications or training. Parents and carers have noted both the significant waiting time for a school psychologist to assess students and the significant cost involved in external assessments. Parents, carers and teachers commented that they found availability of school psychologist expertise was limited. In June 2013 the Directorate was entitled to employ 41.7 school psychologists with an additional 8 senior psychologists and one Manager Psychologist. These positions are across 86 public schools within four School Networks. The ongoing capacity of school psychologists to conduct extensive diagnostic assessments for learning

difficulties needs to be evaluated, as does the viability of other assessment methodology. The Taskforce notes that the United Kingdom has an approach of training assessors, who are teachers, to determine specialist learning difficulties such as dyslexia. (Starkiss, Karen –presentation to Taskforce)

Parents and carers referred frequently in their responses to the need for a diagnosis. They also commented on inconsistent information from schools regarding whether the school required a diagnosis in addressing the student need, and confusion was evident as to the expectations of what a diagnosis meant in terms of meeting student need.

The Taskforce recognises the importance to intervene as early as possible when the difficulty is apparent. Approaches based on teachers being trained to identify characteristics of learning difficulties and then select appropriately matched interventions and adjustments are essential.

Teachers must be able to identify and support students with learning difficulties at all stages of their education, including high school and at college, and put strategies in place whether a student has a diagnosis or not.

**Learning Support Assistants:** In consultation sessions, some schools commented that Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) and teachers were working effectively together in supporting students with learning difficulties. The need for professional development and role clarification of LSAs who may work with students with a learning difficulty, was identified by LSAs and teachers. Often LSAs have no training in the critical areas of literacy, numeracy and supporting behavioural and organisational needs of students. Shaddock (2009) raised many issues associated with the need to clarify the roles played by LSAs (pp. 37-38) and research by Elkins (2002) highlighted the concern that students who need the most help in the classroom were being supported by those least qualified (p. 172).

## **The way forward**

- The Taskforce identifies that a **comprehensive professional learning pathway** with increasing levels of specialist knowledge would support a consistent systematic approach to learning difficulties across the Directorate.
- The Taskforce proposes that **targets for completion of training** would ensure that a pathway of expertise is established to embed knowledge in all sectors of the Directorate, and across leadership of the Directorate.
- The Taskforce recognises that **teachers need scaffolding and support** from teachers with greater expertise in learning difficulties and proposes that each School Network is supported by officers with specialist skills in learning difficulties.

- The Taskforce recognises the need for systemic **professional learning for all Learning Support Assistants** working in the area of learning difficulties. Clarification of the role of these officers would assist communication within schools and between schools and families.
  
- The Taskforce identifies that a system wide approach to **the assessment of students with learning difficulties** needs to be investigated and determined.

## Partnerships with Families

**Consistent communication and support processes across the Directorate, and between schools and families will support effective partnerships that improve outcomes for students with learning difficulties.**

*“I felt very alone and unsupported – parent”*

*“A fantastic teacher who is willing to listen and think outside the teaching square –the teacher’s attitude and flexibility is the key to our son’s ability to move forward. – parent”*

*“Had to go to about 12 places outside Education to get help – parent”*

*“When a child has been assessed, any reports on the school file MUST be read by the teachers responsible for educating the child; parents can then at least refer to this and say what’s worked and what hasn’t, rather than getting blank looks year after year. – parent”*

**The Taskforce commends** parents and carers for the very significant efforts they engage in to support their students with learning difficulties. In consultation responses, parents and carers recorded that they are seeking access to reliable information that will assist them support students. Parents and educators are currently pursuing an ACT SPELD (Supporting people with learning disabilities) branch to support families. The support provided by the branch should enhance Directorate resources.

The Taskforce acknowledges individual teachers and schools in respect to their commitment to improving outcomes of students with learning difficulties. Parents and carers and students commented on the positive impact of specific individual teachers and schools. However, as previously stated, the approach is inconsistent, with a lack of understanding and skill in recognising and working with students with learning difficulties and their families.

**Communication:** There is widespread agreement that home–school collaboration on student learning can have a significant effect on improving educational outcomes. Parents and carers and teachers strongly identified the need to be provided with consistent information and be referred to the right people within schools, within the Directorate and to outside agencies. Parents and carers referred to a “no wrong door approach” where communication is informed and consistent within the various roles of expertise. Communication should inform parents and carers of the pathway, from raising a concern, to what is put in place in the classroom to how it is monitored.

The Taskforce acknowledges the important role of families in providing information to teachers and school psychologists to assist in identifying learning difficulties. Parent and carer feedback strongly identified frustration with communication mechanisms between staff within schools and when a student moves between classes. Online survey responses from parents and carers recorded that

61.8% felt that communication between the school and family in regards to the child's learning difficulty was limited.

Teachers also identified gaps in communication about students with learning difficulties when students move between sectors. Responses from parents and carers strongly acknowledged the effectiveness of adjustments to teaching, curriculum and routines for their students and that effective communication about resourcing and adjustments was essential. Communication about adjustments available for internal assessment and NAPLAN assessment was recognised as needing to be available well in advance to parents and carers and students. Ambiguity appears to exist in the understanding of the provisions to meet adjustments under the Board of Secondary School Studies (BSSS) requirements.

Parents and carers identified the need for "plain English" information to be available on the Directorate's approach to learning difficulties, where to go for more information and support and helpful strategies for families to use at home with their students. The Taskforce notes the NSW Girl Guides Association website is a good example of an accessible model of providing information for families and that could also be appropriate for After School Care and Holiday Programs. (<http://specialneedsgirlguides.com.au/>)

**Self esteem:** Parents and carers and teachers recognised that issues around self esteem needed close attention for students with learning difficulties. Peter Westwood (2008) states (p.15):

- "Learning difficulties often bring with them a number of emotional reactions to persistent lack of success
- Students with learning difficulties often develop low self-esteem, lose confidence in their own abilities, and develop a number of strategies for avoiding tasks that are perceived to be too challenging
- A significant component necessary in helping students with learning difficulties is to address their feelings concerning their situation, to teach them coping strategies, and to break into the failure cycle."

School can assist students to be empowered to articulate what works best for them to learn and achieve as a student with learning difficulties. The Taskforce emphasises that the maintenance of a positive self esteem needs to be addressed in partnership with families and support information should be readily available for parents and carers and students.

**Role of therapy:** Parent and carer responses included the impact of a range of therapy programs for their students with learning difficulties. Teachers commented positively on Therapy ACT speech pathology programs in their schools. The Taskforce examined The Literacy Position Statement from

Speech Pathology Australia and the submission to the Taskforce from Speech Pathology Australia. The Statement was “developed to inform parents, educators and government of the critical role of speech pathologists in the development of literacy”. Statement 3.3 speaks to the involvement of speech pathologists consultancy services in order to improve understanding of the relationship between language and literacy difficulties.

The Taskforce notes that parent and carer access to speech pathology for students was a concern. The Speech Pathology Australia submission notes the limitations within the current system that prevent a tiered approach to services that support all children with communication needs in ACT schools, including:

- Limited systematic identification of children who require additional support. This means that children may be some way through their schooling before problems are identified, and then be on a waiting list for Therapy ACT services
- Limited capacity for Therapy ACT to support children collaboratively with teachers as the school-aged team at Therapy ACT has very limited capacity. The existing model limits the use of speech pathology resources to work collaboratively with teachers in improving oral language, literacy and learning outcomes in ACT public schools.

## The way forward

- The Taskforce proposes the development by the Directorate of **multiple communication mechanisms** that include consistent information, to support families of students with learning difficulties (such as a flowchart of support, booklets, website information from the Directorate linking to helpful external websites and organisations).
- The Taskforce recognises that **enhanced partnerships with therapists** and other professionals working with teachers, parents and directly with students can improve the outcomes of students with learning difficulties and proposes that this should be investigated.
- The Taskforce notes that provisions **for adjustment to assessment** tools for students with learning difficulties need to be strongly promoted to parents and carers, students and staff. This includes Board of Secondary Schools Studies (BSSS) requirements, ACT Scaling Test (AST) and National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN).

## Appendix 1 Terms of Reference Taskforce on Students with Learning Difficulties

Role	<p>The aim of the Taskforce is to consider how to improve assessment and support for children and young people in ACT public schools with learning difficulties, including but not limited to students experiencing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• language disorders</li> <li>• comprehension and processing disorders</li> <li>• dyslexia-related issues</li> <li>• significant difficulties in general numeracy and literacy.</li> </ul>
Reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Taskforce will develop a workplan and consultation strategy. An interim report on progress will be provided to the Minister before the end of 2012 and a report will be presented to the Minister in the first half of 2013.</li> <li>• Minutes of meetings will be provided to the Minister for Education and Training through the Executive Director, Learning, Teaching and Student Engagement.</li> <li>• Minutes of the Taskforce meetings will also be provided to the Disability Education Reference Group (DERG). The Taskforce Chairperson will report in person to this group.</li> </ul>
Functions	<p>The Taskforce will provide the Minister with a report that includes an:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• evaluation of the current level of available support for teachers</li> <li>• examination of the current level of school-parent engagement and communication including the level of support available for parents</li> <li>• assessment of advances in teaching and learning with regard to learning difficulties</li> <li>• evaluation of standing research literature and best-practice evidence.</li> </ul>
Authority	<p>The Taskforce is an advisory body established to provide the Minister for Education and Training with recommendations assessment and support for children and young people in ACT public schools with learning difficulties.</p>
Membership	<p>The Taskforce will comprise members who:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• have demonstrated connection and commitment to children and young people</li> <li>• represent key stakeholder interests and/or</li> <li>• have relevant expertise associated with children and young people with learning difficulties.</li> </ul>
Protocols	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Members must observe the highest standards of professionalism and confidentiality. They must act in good faith, in the best interests of the Taskforce and with due care and diligence.</li> <li>• The Taskforce will work to reach agreement by consensus.</li> <li>• Members acknowledge that each representative voice in the Taskforce is equal, regardless of personal qualifications and background, size of organisation represented, or sectoral interests.</li> <li>• Confidentiality regarding sensitive information must be respected.</li> </ul>
Meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meetings will commence during term 4 of the 2012 school year and will continue in 2013. The Chairperson may call extraordinary meetings as required.</li> <li>• A quorum will be 50 per cent of membership plus one, excluding the secretariat.</li> <li>• The Chairperson will set the agenda.</li> </ul>
Secretariat	<p>The Education and Training Directorate will provide secretariat assistance.</p>
Review	<p>The Terms of Reference must be approved by the ACT Minister for Education and Training. The Taskforce will review the Terms of Reference as required.</p>

## Appendix 2 Invited Presentations to the Taskforce

Date	Presenters/ Organisation	Presentation
29 <sup>th</sup> October 2012	Ms Beth Mitchell, Director, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education and Student Engagement	Overview of the Directorates' schools, sections and services
29 <sup>th</sup> October 2012	Ms Kerrie Heath, Senior Manager, Disability Education (ETD)	Overview of current practice and future directions in the area of learning difficulties in the Disability and Literacy and Numeracy Sections and also presented on the Online Disability Standards training that will be rolled out in 2013.
29 <sup>th</sup> October 2012	Ms Billieann Bambrick, Senior Counsellor (ETD)	<i>Learning Difficulties –Practice Guide</i> for school counsellors
21 <sup>st</sup> November 2012	Ms Kerrie Heath, Senior Manager Disability Education (ETD)	Introduction to Online Modules which are being trialled by the Directorate
26 <sup>th</sup> November 2012	Ms Marnie Murphy, Project Officer Disability Section (ETD)	Introduction to Online Modules which are being trialled by the Directorate – practical session
18 <sup>th</sup> February 2013	Ms Karen Starkiss, Consultant, Dyslexia Support Services, currently based in Melbourne, previous Principal and Consultant in the United Kingdom	Learning Difficulties: Policy, Programs and Practice (information for United Kingdom)
18 <sup>th</sup> March 2013	Ms Vanessa Close, Therapy ACT, Taskforce Member	Speech Pathology: Role and possibilities of speech pathology and learning difficulties
18 <sup>th</sup> March 2013	Dr Nadia Butler	International Perspective: Florida USA response to learning difficulties and messages for ACT schools
8 <sup>th</sup> April 2013	Ms Jo Whitear and Ms Alison Hatcher/ Taskforce members	Improving Intervention for Children with Learning Difficulties through Improving Literacy Instruction
13 <sup>th</sup> May 2013	Mr Iain Barr	Overview of the ETD Engaging Schools Framework

## Appendix 3

## Consultation Table

### 1. ACT ETD STAFF

Date	Group	Number	Note
14/03/2013	Literacy and Numeracy Field Officers	18	Represents 18 schools
20/03/2013	Primary staff including LSAs	13 teachers 5 LSAs	Represents 11 primary schools
04/04/2013	High School	4 school based teachers 2 office based teachers	Represents 4 high schools
10/04/2013	Principals/deputies	22 school based leaders 5 office based leaders	Represents 18 schools (11 primary, 5 high schools, 1 P to Y10 school, 1 college)
10/04/2013	Counsellors/college and high school teachers	43 counsellors 5 College teachers 1 High School teacher 4 office based teachers	In addition to counsellors Represents 3 colleges, 1 high school,
April - School based consultations using the same process	Macgregor Primary	8	Individual responses
April - School based consultations using the same process	Maribyrnong Primary	1	Whole school
April - School based consultations using the same process	Lyons Early Childhood School	1	Whole school

### 2. PARENTS AND CARERS

Date	Format	Number
06/05/2013	Consultation session with individual responses	39
22/04/2013 to 07/05/2013	On line survey	56
October 2012 to May 2013	Individual comments to Taskforce email address	6

### 3. STUDENTS

Date	Format	Number
06/05/2013	Individual interviews with students	14 boys 7 girls Total -21 students from p to y 6

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