Achieving Educational Opportunity for Students with Disability in Queensland Catholic Schools: A Needs Analysis

Prepared by the Public Policy Institute, Australian Catholic University
About the Public Policy Institute

The Public Policy Institute (PPI) is an independent policy think tank within the Australian Catholic University (ACU) established in 2009 to:

• Undertake high quality research to inform policy development
• Provide informed commentary and analysis on key policy issues
• Engage with the broad policy community to tackle emerging policy issues
Introduction – the need for a review of current provision

This paper canvasses important issues associated with funding for students with disability in Catholic schools in Queensland.

The Queensland Catholic Education Commission (QCEC) is committed to providing high quality education opportunities to all students, including students with disability, attending Catholic schools in the State. The QCEC is aware that stable and adequate funding targeted at the specific needs of these students is essential to enable them to reach their potential and is concerned that growing pressures and increasing expectations make it difficult for Catholic schools to deliver the best educational services for these students. While there are many uncertainties in the current funding and policy environment for both disability and schools, the QCEC expects that the difficulties encountered by schools at present are likely to continue into the immediate future.

Queensland Catholic schools have a strong commitment to policies of social inclusion and student wellbeing, seeking to cater for all students, whatever their personal characteristics and experience. For this inclusive approach to be effective however, schools need access to a reasonable level of differentiated resources so that as far as possible, all students are able to participate equally in quality learning opportunities. National policy developments have raised parents’ expectations of schools, with parents increasingly expecting schools to be a one-stop shop for students with disability, integrating and coordinating the range of services needed by some students. While Catholic schools readily take on this task, it requires an extensive investment of teacher time and makes heavy demands on school resources.

A number of factors are converging to heighten concern about the adequacy of support for students with disability in the Catholic system.

First, there has been a significant increase in numbers of students with disability in the system – a 92 per cent increase over six years – with the result that almost every teacher now has a student with disability or learning difficulty in their class.

Second, the accepted practice of mainstreaming students with disability has had an impact on the whole classroom and the total school environment, as well as making heavy demands on teachers and teaching practices.

Third, the principle of school choice combined with the requirements of anti-discrimination legislation imposes obligations on all school authorities to provide the services and support needed by students with disability so that they can participate equally in school life. Resourcing needs to be adequate to the task set by policy and legislation.
On behalf of the QCEC, the Public Policy Institute (PPI) of the Australian Catholic University has undertaken an independent review of the current funding situation, in order to analyse the assistance needed to enable students with disability in Catholic schools in Queensland to achieve the best educational outcomes and to equip them to lead rewarding and satisfying lives.

The paper that follows examines relevant data in the context of the current policy framework in order to determine the priority needs for the Catholic system to meet its commitment to provide the best educational opportunities for students with disability in the immediate and longer term. The paper is presented in seven parts:

1. An analysis of data on numbers of students, trends and categories of disability
2. A review of the current policy environment
3. A summary of funding sources for students with disability from the Commonwealth and state governments
4. Discussion of areas of need highlighted by the QCEC and schools
5. Analysis of priorities and gaps
6. A summary of findings
7. Options for future funding and policy development
1. Data and trends - students with disability in Queensland Catholic schools

Growth in numbers of students with disabilities

Mirroring the situation in other states and school systems, the number of students with disability in the Queensland Catholic system has been growing rapidly. In 2012, 4,253 students with disability were enrolled in Queensland Catholic schools, representing a 92 per cent increase over six years (see Table 1) and accounting now for 3.2 per cent of enrolments. The Catholic system enrolls about 13 per cent of students with disability in Queensland.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Physical</th>
<th>Vision</th>
<th>Hearing</th>
<th>Intellectual</th>
<th>Social-emotional</th>
<th>ASD</th>
<th>Speech-language</th>
<th>Total Student Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>478</td>
<td>378</td>
<td>782</td>
<td>297</td>
<td>2,217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>499</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>860</td>
<td>386</td>
<td>2,339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>521</td>
<td>502</td>
<td>1,108</td>
<td>424</td>
<td>2,952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>289</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>502</td>
<td>572</td>
<td>1,293</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>3,262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>371</td>
<td>485</td>
<td>637</td>
<td>1,485</td>
<td>429</td>
<td>3,634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>455</td>
<td>458</td>
<td>644</td>
<td>1,699</td>
<td>448</td>
<td>3,952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>511</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>635</td>
<td>1,938</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>4,253</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This growth in the numbers and proportion of students with disability in the Catholic system in Queensland is similar to trends in all other states except for the Northern Territory and is consistent with the high growth rate of enrolment of students with disability in non-government schools generally compared with public schools.

Across Australia, the number of funded students with disability in all sectors increased by 28 per cent between 2005 and 2010, from 134,864 to 172,300. The increase in enrolments in Queensland Catholic schools over the same time period was substantially higher, at 88 per cent. The year 2005 saw the introduction of the Disability Standards for Education, which imposed a responsibility on both Commonwealth and state governments to make appropriate provision for students with disability.

Among the reasons suggested for the significantly increased numbers of students with disability are the general trend to mainstreaming students with disability, improved diagnostic capability, better survival rates for premature babies, and a funding incentive. The growth in the population of students with disability has outstripped the growth in the disability rate in the Australian population as a whole.
**Categories of impairment**

The main category of disability in Queensland Catholic schools, accounting for 46 per cent of the population of students with disability, is the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This is also the fastest growing category of disability. Students with autism are by far the most demanding as well as the most numerous category of disability. Schools note the wide variety in the impact of these students who are not only the most demanding, if their own educational needs are to be met, but also cause the greatest disruption in classes, thus affecting the educational progress of other students. Schools often have to cope with complaints from parents of other students in the class who are concerned that their own child’s education is disrupted.

The other major categories of disability are social-emotional (15 per cent), hearing (12 per cent), intellectual (11 per cent), and speech-language (10 per cent) impairment. Teachers report that after autism, it is the students with speech-language difficulties who make the highest demands on teachers. While they are a small proportion of students with disability, students with a physical disability often have heavy resource needs, needing one-on-one physical assistance and capital investment.

**Location**

The majority (73 per cent) of students with disabilities in Queensland Catholic schools are located in metropolitan schools. The small numbers of students in remote and rural schools and in some regional areas make it difficult to provide adequate services.

**Gender**

In Catholic schools in Queensland, 70 per cent of students with disability are male. This accords with international data which shows a marked gender difference in students with disability, with males far outnumbering females. Typically males represent between 60 per cent and 70 per cent of total numbers. This can be seen as consistent with outcomes data which show the lower educational performance of boys, although there is no system for collating data on the educational outcomes of students with disability.

**The national picture**

There are differing percentages of funded students with disability in each state and territory (between 3 and 8 per cent), which is largely due to different definitions. Some states and territories adopt a broader definition than others. Mapping undertaken by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) for the Gonski Review on funding for educational disadvantage showed, using 2008 data, that average enrolment of students with disability varied from a low 3 per cent in Western Australia to more than 10 per cent in the Northern Territory. As Figure 1
(reproduced from the ACER report) shows, the Queensland figure is the second lowest at 3.6 per cent.

Figure 1 Funded students with disabilities, number and proportion (percentage) of total, 2008

Nationally, by far the majority of these students attend mainstream schools. It is estimated that around 9 per cent of students with disability aged 5 to 14 years attend special schools. There are currently 416 special schools across Australia, most of which (332) are in the government school sector. While there are some special schools in the Catholic systems nationally, there are none in Queensland.

In addition to students with disability, in all schools there are many students without a reported disability but who have special learning needs. In a survey of primary teachers cited by the Productivity Commission (School Workforce 2012), 16 per cent of the students taught by the surveyed teachers were identified as having special learning needs. This roughly accords with a 2010 estimate by a Commonwealth ministerial working group on students with disabilities that between 15 and 20 per cent of students have either a disability or learning difficulty. This means that most teachers now have students with disability or learning difficulty in their classes.

2. The policy environment

A strong economic imperative drives public investment in education generally, and in the education of disadvantaged groups. The extensive investment governments make in education is driven by a human capital agenda which connects the skills and knowledge of the population with national productivity and economic growth. At the same time, investment in education is important for social well-being and mobility. Schools are expected to provide the skills and competencies essential to full participation in society and success in the labour market and lay the groundwork for individual well-being and quality of life for all students. The public benefits of this
investment include economic growth and prosperity, increased innovation and diffusion of new ideas, better health, greater social cohesion and lower crime rates. Higher overall levels of education in a population reduce dependency on social welfare, are associated with better health outcomes and higher levels of institutional trust and civic cooperation and lower levels of crime and imprisonment and contribute to greater efficiency in personal consumer and investment behaviour.

On the other side of the equation, the social and economic costs of low educational performance are high. These costs have risen substantially with the development of the knowledge society and a technologically driven economy and the upward bias in skill requirements in the labour market.

This economic rationale applies equally to students with disability, who run a greater risk of not completing their schooling and failing to achieve. Recent ABS data reported in the Gonski Review (121) demonstrate the significantly lower education and employment outcomes of students with disability and underline the importance of adequate support and investment:

- Students with disability are less likely to complete Year 12. In 2009, approximately 30 per cent of people aged 15 to 64 years with a reported disability had completed Year 12, and 15 per cent had completed a bachelor’s degree or higher. This compares with 55 per cent and 24 per cent for people without disabilities respectively;

- This comparative lack of educational attainment has a negative effect on the employment prospects and level of income for people with disability. In 2009, the unemployment rate for people aged 15 to 64 with reported disabilities was 7.8 per cent, compared with 5.1 per cent for those with no reported disabilities;

- The median gross personal income per week for people aged 15 to 64 with reported disabilities was $306, compared with $614 for those with no reported disabilities;

- There are also greater levels of welfare dependence among people with reported disabilities.

It is clear that the best education of students with disability cannot be achieved without investment in educational strategies targeted at their particular needs, based on evidence about what works for particular students in particular contexts. Evidence also shows overwhelmingly the significance of early intervention. The cost of interventions is higher and their effectiveness less assured as children get older.
National Disability Strategy

Both economic and social considerations underpin the national policies and legislation that govern the education of students with disability in all states and school systems. The mainstay of the policy framework is the National Disability Strategy which places an obligation on schools to support students with disability to participate in education on the same basis as students without disability. State and territory governments are obliged to meet the provisions of the Disability Standards for Education 2005 legislation, and rights under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992.

The Gonski Report (120) outlines the main pillars of the national legislative and policy framework:

Australian school systems and individual schools are required to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 which provides protection against discrimination based on disability and requires that students with disability receive the same educational opportunities as everyone else. The Disability Standards for Education (DSE), introduced in 2005, set out the roles and responsibilities of education providers in meeting the requirements of the Act.

Under the DSE, education providers are required to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ to ensure that students participate in schooling on an equal basis to other students. Reasonable adjustment is defined under the DSE as educational delivery or support that differs from what is provided to meet the normal needs of a student of that age or level. In determining the particular adjustments that are reasonably required, education providers must consider the nature and impact of the student’s disability and how it affects the student’s ability to participate, while balancing the interests of all parties affected, including the student with disability, the education provider, staff and other students. A review of the DSE is currently underway and expected to be complete by the end of 2011.

Australia also has a National Disability Strategy in place, which is overseen by COAG and specifies that increasing the educational outcomes of students with disability, including the Year 12 or equivalent attainment rates, is a priority for all Australian governments. The National Disability Strategy identifies learning and skills as an area of policy action, including strengthening the capability of all education providers to deliver inclusive high-quality educational programs and a focus on reducing the gap between students with disability and other students.
The Review of the DSE referred to above reported in 2012 and found that the effectiveness of the Standards was compromised by the failure of resourcing to keep pace with the increasing number of students with disability.

The *National Disability Strategy* which encompasses all sectors of schooling commits to mainstream education programs for people of all abilities. This policy of inclusion is well recognised as the best approach to educating students with disability. Catholic school authorities are committed to establishing practices and procedures that incorporate inclusive educational practices into their operations and also have a special commitment to pastoral care which underpins a concern in all Catholic schools for the total wellbeing of all students and the development of the whole person.

At the national level, the *National Disability Strategy* sets out a range of broad strategies for improving the quality of education provided to students with disability. The *Strategy* particularly highlights the important role of teacher training in ensuring that education is equally accessible to all students:

> An inclusive and accessible educational culture based on the principle of universality will assist students of all abilities. Teacher training and development is critical to ensure that teachers can meet the diverse educational needs of all students. Many people with disability cite low expectations from those around them as a major reason for not reaching their full potential. It is vital that education providers have the same expectations of students with disability as of others, and collaborate with and support families in their aspirations for family members with disability.

As part of the *National Disability Strategy*, the Commonwealth introduced a *More Support for Students with Disabilities* initiative, designed to improve teacher capacity in this area, and established the Schools Disability Advisory Council to advise the Commonwealth Government on how to provide better services to students with disability. The Commonwealth is also leading work to develop a nationally consistent model for identifying students with disability and collecting data on their educational performance, in order to better understand their learning needs and resource requirements. The Gonski Review emphasised the importance of this data development.

In addition to these initiatives, the *National Disability Strategy* notes the importance of early intervention, improved pathways to further education and employment, literacy programs, and curriculum support.

*Disability policy and the national curriculum*

The development of the Australian Curriculum through the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) also comes within the purview of the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* and the *Disability Standards for Education 2005*. 
The Australian Curriculum is designed to be inclusive of all students with disability. Its three-dimensional design, comprising learning areas, general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities, is intended to:

*Provide teachers with flexibility to cater for the diverse needs of students with disability across Australia and to personalise their learning.* (ACARA website)

ACARA understands that 'many students are able to achieve educational standards commensurate with their peers, as long as the necessary adjustments are made to the way in which they are taught and to the means through which they demonstrate their learning.' The curriculum makes provision for teachers to make adjustments in their planning for the individual learning needs of students with disability. ACARA is continuing to advance this work which makes considerable demands on teachers' professional knowledge and time.

### 3. Funding for students with disability in Queensland Catholic schools

**Recurrent and capital funding**

In 2012, there were 292 Catholic schools in Queensland, enrolling 134,962 students. The majority of schools – 223 schools or 76 per cent, provide primary education, accounting for 59 per cent of students.

Sixty per cent of the recurrent resources of Queensland Catholic schools come from the Commonwealth Government. In 2012, Catholic schools received $888 million in general recurrent grants from the Commonwealth. Under the QCEC Group Funding Model, 1.5 per cent of this funding is allocated to extra support for students with disability.

In addition, the Queensland Government provides 20 per cent of the recurrent resources of Queensland Catholic schools, equivalent to 21.26 per cent of the cost of educating a child in a state school. Of this state funding (totalling $292 million in 2012), 6.65 per cent is quarantined for programs to support students with disabilities, under the *State Special Needs Program*. This has been a stable source of funding, greatly welcomed by Catholic schools, although with the increasing numbers of students with disability enrolled in Catholic schools, the per capita allocation has reduced from $6,097 in 2006 to $5,484 in 2012.

A further contribution to schools' operating resources comes from fees paid by parents, which amount on average to 20 per cent of school funding.

Capital needs are mainly met by the Commonwealth and state governments, although the long lead times involved in capital projects mean that the immediate
capital needs of students with disability generally have to be met from other funding sources.

**Specific purpose funding**

Like all developed countries, Australian governments provide considerable additional resources for special education needs, in pursuit of equity, although approaches and resource levels vary widely. One variation is the disparity between government and non-government schools in the funding of students with disability. The majority of funding for students with disability in public schools comes from state and territory governments, with the Commonwealth Government providing only what could be considered top-up funds. The result is that students with disability in non-government schools receive substantially less funding than students with the same educational needs in government schools. This shortfall in funding particularly affects students with high support costs.

The Gonski Review noted this funding differential and recommended an even-handed approach. Not only does the Report recognise that students with disability in non-government schools have been underfunded under existing arrangements, it also recognises that collaboration between sectors is the most efficient and effective way to deliver support and sees benefits in the effective coordination of resources and efforts across the government and non-government sectors.

Student needs as well as available funding vary considerably. The Gonski Review (121) estimates that 4 per cent of students with a diagnosed disability in mainstream schools need no educational adjustment to participate in education on the same basis as students without disability. Other students (around 60 per cent) require supplementary adjustments, 25 per cent require substantial adjustments, and 10 per cent require extensive adjustments. The Review also notes (134) vast differences among the states in their allocations to students with disability:

States such as Victoria and South Australia apply per capita amounts (additional to base funding) for students with disability in government schools based on a scale from low to high support needs. In Victoria, allocations are divided across a six-point scale and range from $5,894 to $44,991 (Vic DEECD 2011). South Australia uses a similar needs-based scale, with allocations ranging from $1,722 to $36,757 for students with disabilities in mainstream education. (SA DECS 2010)

The report by ACER for the Gonski Review estimated that the average targeted funding for students with disability in government schools was $13,232. As shown in Table 2 below, the comparable figure for a student with disability in a Queensland Catholic school in 2012 was $7,759, a significant shortfall and a 6 per cent decrease on 2011 funding.
Table 2: Students with Disability - Funding Programs – per capita

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>% increase 2006-2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State Special Needs Program</td>
<td>$6,097</td>
<td>$6,380</td>
<td>$5,766</td>
<td>$5,748</td>
<td>$6,067</td>
<td>$5,886</td>
<td>$5,484</td>
<td>-11.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LNSLN Schools Grant - Recurrent Element</td>
<td>$1,589</td>
<td>$1,475</td>
<td>$1,406</td>
<td>$1,452</td>
<td>$1,401</td>
<td>$1,344</td>
<td>$1,252</td>
<td>-27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LNSLN Schools Grant - Per Capita Strategic Assistance</td>
<td>$778</td>
<td>$816</td>
<td>$852</td>
<td>$894</td>
<td>$947</td>
<td>$994</td>
<td>$1,023</td>
<td>+31.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>$8,464</td>
<td>$8,671</td>
<td>$8,024</td>
<td>$8,094</td>
<td>$8,415</td>
<td>$8,224</td>
<td>$7,759</td>
<td>-9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

% Comparison of funding between years: +2.5% -7.5% +0.9% +4% -2.3% -6%

As the figures below, reproduced from the Gonski Report, show, the additional public funding allocated to students with disability is much higher than the allocation to other categories of disadvantage and the average funding for students with disability in government schools varies substantially. The data for Queensland were not available to the Gonski Review.

Figure 47: Aggregate government funding for disadvantaged students, 2009–10

Source: Rorris et al. 2011.
Queensland Catholic schools at present receive additional Commonwealth and state funding for students with disability under specific purpose programs. The following programs provide additional support for students with disability:

- The Commonwealth’s *Literacy and Numeracy Special Learning Needs* (LNSLN) program (a targeted program providing funding to non-government schools from 2010-2011 to 2013-14), provided for Queensland Catholic Schools:
  - a flat per capita amount ($1,252 in 2012) to support educationally disadvantaged students, including students with disability, on the basis of census data; and
  - a ‘strategic assistance’ amount ($1,023 in 2012) for students with verified disabilities (that is, a significant diagnosed and verified disability). This program does not apply to students with minor or lower level disability.

- In 2012 and 2013, the Commonwealth’s *More Support for Students with Disabilities* (MSSD) Initiative provided additional funding of $641 (2012) and $590 (2013) for each student with disability for specific initiatives under the umbrella of ‘strengthening the capacity and expertise of Australian schools and teachers to provide additional support to students with disabilities, contributing to their learning experiences, educational outcomes and transitions to further education or work.’
Since 2008, specific support has been available for children with autism through programs such as the cross-portfolio Commonwealth initiative, *Helping Children with Autism*, which has a particular focus on improving early intervention and support for children with autism and increasing understanding and awareness. The education component of this initiative, delivered through the *Positive Partnerships* program, has funded professional development and high quality information sessions. While the support the Catholic system has received through this initiative has been critical in meeting the needs of children with autism, it falls well short of the funding needed.

For an extended period, and since 2008 under a formal agreement, Queensland Catholic schools have had access to services from the Queensland Government’s *Advisory Visiting Teacher* (AVT) support services, a suite of services for students with disability, falling into specific categories of impairment, in both government and non-government schools in the State. The QCEC considers the support it receives through the AVT support services as essential frontline services, vital to the welfare of the most vulnerable children in Catholic schools. The program has been especially valuable for providing support to students in more remote areas.

While providing much-needed support for defined purposes, these programs are generally short term, with no certainty of renewal, and are often accompanied by a considerable burden of accountability and reporting. This has an impact particularly on the employment of specialist staff and makes it difficult to commit to the ongoing support needed by particular students.

Current funding arrangements leave students with disability in Catholic schools in Queensland at a significant disadvantage compared with students in government schools, receiving only 59 per cent of the national government school average of $13,232. The rapidly increasing enrolment of students with disability in the Catholic system in Queensland has seen a significant reduction in available funding per student in 2012.

**Future funding**

A number of proposals in the Gonski Review of school funding have the potential to impact in the long term on the recurrent funding levels of Queensland Catholic schools, depending on the outcome of negotiations between the Commonwealth and the states and the detail of Commonwealth school funding legislation for 2014 and beyond.
Relevant Gonski proposals under consideration include:

- a realignment of responsibilities between the Commonwealth and states, so that the Commonwealth accepts a greater share of funding responsibility for government schools and the states take on a greater share of funding responsibility for non-government schools;

- a new Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) as the basis of funding for all schools, which includes a base per capita amount, supplemented by loadings for disadvantaged students, including students with disability;

- for non-government schools, parents are expected to continue to make a contribution, according to a measure of capacity to pay;

- a loading for disability that is equal between government and non-government schools, with the resourcing requirements of students with disability established by a nationally consistent method for collecting data on their educational performance;

- the abolition of Commonwealth targeted programs;

- public funding to be provided to school systems for distribution to their schools, with systems publicly accountable for that redistribution.

With decisions still to be made about these details, a great deal of uncertainty surrounds future school funding. This uncertainty is particularly troubling at a time when the need for additional support is growing.

Indications are new funding arrangements will be phased in from 2014 and will involve, at least for the Commonwealth contribution, a base per student grant plus a loading according to need and the phasing out of targeted programs. It may be some time before the impact of the new arrangements on individual schools and particular categories of disadvantaged students, including students with disability, is known. The future of Commonwealth funding provided through partnership arrangements and targeted programs in the new funding system is unclear, as is the future of state government support for students with disability.

In September 2012 the Queensland Government advised the QCEC of its decision to cease funding support for non-government schools through the AVT scheme in the areas of hearing, physical and vision impairments (21 per cent of total students with disabilities) from the end of 2012. This decision was made on the grounds that the program was duplicating other funding sources for these students, notably the proportion of Queensland Government funding of 21.26 per cent of the cost of
educating a child in a state school quarantined for programs supporting students with disabilities, under the *State Special Needs Program*.

Subsequent to this advice, government agreed to the QCEC request for a modified program of AVT support for prioritised students within these categories of impairment for 2013, since no other support was available.

### 4. Areas of need

Having a variety of funding sources for students with disability is justified, given the diversity of educational needs of these students and the wide range of approaches and strategies adopted by schools to improve their educational chances. Funds are variously invested in:

- The professional development of staff, including further formal study;
- Access to external support services and specialised knowledge, including professionals, peripatetic specialised teachers, special needs coordinators, teacher assistants and aides, school counsellors, educational psychologists, psychotherapists, speech therapists, occupational therapists, doctors and nurses. These personnel may work one-on-one with a student, or support a teacher, or be integrated into the school as a whole, to support staff generally;
- The employment of specialist teachers;
- The employment of visiting teachers to help classroom teachers adapt the national curriculum materials in order to provide personalised learning for students with disability and to support professional development, liaise with families, and help coordinate with other specialist support services and equipment;
- The employment of teacher aides and support staff;
- Cooperation between schools, including sharing the use of specialist teachers;
- Support for parent and community involvement;
- Support for curriculum adaptation and assessment;
- The purchase of equipment;
- Literacy assistance.
Two case studies bring home the day-to-day realities of supporting students with disability in school and show the potential for student achievement when adequate support is available:

Case Study 1:

'Thomas' was diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy shortly after his birth. Cerebral Palsy is a non-progressive, non-contagious motor condition that causes a physical disability, affecting muscles and a person’s ability to control them. Tasks such as walking, sitting, or tying shoes may be difficult for some, while others might have difficulty grasping objects.

Thomas attends St Michael's Primary School. Since enrolling in 2011 in a prep class, a number of strategies have been put in place so he can have a safe, inclusive and educationally appropriate experience in school. He currently has access to a full time school officer so he can be assisted for any given tasks and also to assist him with toileting and general mobility around the classroom and school. A new class teacher has to be trained each year to cater for Thomas's needs. Lessons need to be prepared well in advance to allow him to access the curriculum. Although he is academically able, even the simplest of tasks in the classroom need careful planning and adaptation. Movement is crucial for his comfort so he has to be transitioned throughout the day with the help of either the class teacher or the school officer. Each year the Occupational Therapist provides in-service training for all staff so that all can assist if needed. Staff access specialist training provided in the local area if needed. This is all funded through the school budget – more specifically, the school's students with disabilities budget.

Thomas is a friendly and hugely popular member of the school. Members of his cohort spend time playing, socialising, and interacting with him every day. As he is limited during outdoor play it is imperative that his friends initiate some play activities.

Special preparations had to be made to accommodate Thomas’s needs at school. This included making sure his classroom access was safe, building a special disabled toilet to allow Thomas privacy and safety, and providing access to all common areas such as the library, basketball court, school hall and the church. A lift has been installed for access to the upstairs classrooms. Thomas needs assistance to press the buttons for the lift.

It would be beneficial for Thomas to have access to some play equipment that he could use, such as a specially adapted static adventure playground. This is not possible in the current budget. At present Thomas is unable to access the oval because of the uneven grassed area. This has severely limited his playtime activities.
Case Study 2:

Caitlyn was born with the Amyoplasia form of Arthrogryposis. Amyoplasia means that not all of Caitlyn’s muscles developed in utero and many of those which did develop are very weak. In Caitlyn’s case her hand, arms, feet, legs and spine have all been affected to varying degrees. Caitlyn is unable to walk independently and is wheelchair-reliant. Caitlyn is unable to actively bend her arms while in an upright position, so she is unable to get her hands to her face and is therefore unable to feed herself. Caitlyn has quite a narrow grip and is unable to hold any large items. She is also unable to dress herself. She is totally dependent on adults for all self-care tasks including feeding, dressing and toileting.

Caitlyn commenced preschool at St Joseph’s in 2006. Preparation for her commencement began in 2005. MontroseAccess (The Queensland Society for Crippled Children) provided guidance and assistance on the physical modifications required for Caitlyn to access all aspects of the curriculum. The Advisory Visiting Teachers from Education Queensland have provided expertise, loaned equipment so that it could be trialled and assisted school staff so Caitlyn could be included in all aspects of school life. The Occupational Therapists and Physiotherapists from the Community Resource Centre have assisted with ideas for adjustments or alternative activities so that Caitlyn was able to participate in all class activities. Through the funding for Students with Disabilities and Special Consideration Funding, the Diocesan Catholic Education Office has provided a full-time teacher assistant to support Caitlyn’s access to the classroom curriculum and to ensure her safety in the school environment. Caitlyn’s parents have provided equipment, time and support to ensure that Caitlyn has been able to participate and learn from curriculum and extra curricula activities.

In year 7 in 2013, Caitlyn was elected school captain by her peers. She has twice received the Trinity College Medal for speech and drama (highest points in junior section). Caitlyn is a member of the school band and ensemble, playing the glockenspiel. She competes in the Biloela eisteddfod annually in the areas of speech and drama, music and singing. Over the years she has won many trophies across all disciplines, as well as bursaries and other major speech and drama awards. Caitlyn is also a member of the school choir and was in the Optiminds team in 2010. She has competed in the school swimming carnival each year, swimming all four strokes (multi-disability class), as well as the cross country (in which she competes with adult support) and has won age champion – disability section on each occasion. She also competes in the throwing disciplines at the school athletics carnival, as she is unable to sprint or jump. Caitlyn has participated in the ICAS UNSW exams, across all subjects offered since she was in year 3 and has achieved credits and distinctions each year. Next term with the support of her Dad and teacher assistant, Caitlyn will attend the Year 7 school camp at Chaverim which is an outdoor education centre near Bundaberg.

The issue for Caitlyn has always been, and continues to be access. However with a collaborative approach from a team of stakeholders and specialists, all access issues have been addressed. Caitlyn is still unable to write in an upright position, so she uses the plinth her father made for her (with adjustments for growth) to begin year 1. She lies on her left side and writes at the customised desk. Her Teacher Assistant sets up the writing materials by positioning the book/worksheet and putting the pen in her hand and also the TA performs any ruling of lines, cutting, gluing etc. To access the computer for word processing, Caitlyn uses a mouse and a virtual keyboard, and is quite proficient in all office software including word, powerpoint and paint, as well as using the internet for research.
According to schools and teachers, while the current funding regimes and programs provide essential support, as the two case studies show, there are particular features of the funding arrangements that make it difficult for them to meet their aim of giving students with disability the best education possible for them to lead fulfilling, purposeful and productive lives. These include the:

- stop-start nature of many funding initiatives, making it difficult to sustain strategies for individual students;
- lack of flexibility in specific purpose programs, which makes it difficult to cater for needs as they arise;
- heavy burden of reporting that accompanies many programs, taking time away from teaching;
- long time period needed before the impact of certain programs such as improved teacher training will be felt;
- inadequacy of many one-off professional development activities; and
- ongoing uncertainty about future funding.

5. Priorities and gaps

In their day to day operations, schools and teachers are increasingly conscious of the greater numbers of students with special learning needs and the barriers they face in striving to meet these needs.

The support they indicate that would have the greatest effect on their capacity to make a difference for students with disability is to have better access to specialist staff and health and allied health professionals, more classroom support to assist in behaviour management, more time to manage the individual learning needs of students with disability, and more administrative support to assist with the coordination of services, family liaison and reporting. They identify the need for this kind of support to be flexibly available wherever schools are located, with particular attention paid to making services accessible to schools and teachers outside the metropolitan area, possibly through collaborative arrangements between government and non-government school authorities.

Box 1 highlights the real school issues raised by school staff and parents:
Box 1

MAIN MESSAGES FROM SCHOOLS AND PARENTS

Pressures on schools:

- Classroom support is needed because time pressures and behaviour management issues are really having an impact
- Behavioural issues cause disruption to normal classroom activities, leading to complaints from all parents
- Parents are more demanding of teachers, especially expecting them to integrate students with disability into the classroom
- Parents look to schools as a one-stop shop, or at least as a channel to access specialist services
- Time needed for assessment, developing teaching strategies, managing adaptive technologies, liaison with parents, liaison with specialists, reporting

Particular demands:

- Overwhelmingly, students with autism are the most demanding, with wide variation in their impact but generally causing disruption in class
- Highly demanding also are students with speech and language difficulties
- Physical impairment causes the greatest resource needs, but these are of relatively low incidence
- Extra load on teachers also from students with special learning needs, Indigenous students, ESL students

Teacher capability:

- Behavioural management is the big issue for teachers
- Upskilling of staff is essential, but one-day training sessions are insufficient
- More staff are needed to give classroom teachers time and support
- Regional and remote schools have difficulty accessing expertise and services
- Adjustment of the curriculum is very demanding on teachers

Service gaps:

- Greatest gap is lack of specialists, especially outside metropolitan areas
- AVTs provide an invaluable service
- Flexibility in funding and stability are essential to meet needs, employ or retain staff, maintain quality of services
- The processes of accessing resources and reporting are very time-consuming—('effort should be on intervention rather than verification')
- Intersectoral collaboration does not always work well on the ground
To summarise, the main areas of need experienced by Catholic schools in their efforts to achieve the best educational outcomes for students with disability are:

- **Access to expert assistance**, including qualified special education teachers and allied health professionals, to support the educational needs of students with disability;

- **Classroom support from non-teaching staff**, to assist in behavioural management so as to limit the impact of disruptive behaviour on the educational experience of the whole class;

- **Additional staffing resources to enable teachers to assess learning needs**, plan, adapt the curriculum and liaise as necessary to provide the best education experience for students with disability.

6. **Summary of findings**

This analysis has found a shortfall in funding for students with disability in Queensland Catholic schools in 2013, which is likely to continue for some years. The shortfall is caused by a number of factors:

- **significant growth in the numbers and proportion** of students with disability in Catholic schools over the past five years, without a commensurate increase in funding;

- **uneven funding arrangements** for students with disability in government and non-government schools under existing grants programs;

- **uncertainty** attached to post-2013 state and Commonwealth recurrent funding levels and allocative arrangements for non-government schools, as a result of the Gonski Review of school funding;

- **additional uncertainty** attached to the future of Commonwealth targeted funding programs and resources that until now have been available to Queensland Catholic schools under national partnership agreements and other arrangements;

- **long drawn-out process** of arriving at nationally consistent definitions of disability as the basis of future funding – the results of the 2012 trial are awaiting consideration by Commonwealth and state ministers at the time of writing;

- **uncertainty about the future of Queensland Government funding** that has been available for many years to enable Catholic schools to support and assist students with disability.
As a result of these pressures and uncertainty about future funding, the resources of schools and the Catholic system are severely stretched in attempting to meet the needs of students with disability. While in effect there will never be enough resources to meet all the educational needs of all students with disability in all locations, the present arrangements leave funding gaps, with the result that high priority needs are unable to be met and many individual students are disadvantaged.

Not only is there no clear funding quantum that is appropriate for all students with disability, there is no clear amount of funding appropriate for allocation to individual categories of disability. Students with disability have varied needs, and this calls for a flexible pool of resources able to target interventions which are known to work to address individual barriers to quality schooling.

As noted in the Gonski Review (119):

> While students with disability often require additional assistance to access and participate in schooling, there are significant differences in the educational need of students within this cohort. This is a reflection of the diverse range of students with disability, as well as the diverse way in which disability manifests itself.

Many of the funding programs for students with disability have a specific purpose, and resources are not able to be used flexibly to cater for individual learning needs. This approach tends to lock students into certain programs, making it difficult to adjust as needs change, and leaves some priority needs unfunded.

In addition to the inflexibility of specific purpose funding, the stop-start nature of some programs for students with disability means that schools are unable to make ongoing commitments to the employment of professional and support staff, or to make the necessary investment in learning aids or the skills required for the adaptation of programs and the adjustment of the curriculum to meet individual needs.

While the majority of students with disability are located in metropolitan schools, particular difficulties are faced by schools in remote and rural areas, which often have to cater for students with multiple disadvantage yet do not have access to the specialist support they need.
The priorities for stable and ongoing support identified in this study are for:

- **employment within the Catholic system of specialist staff**, including staff with special education qualifications, accessible to all schools, and additional funding for travel to assist schools in regional and remote areas;

- **administrative support** available to schools to help make connections with health, allied health and other professionals and to coordinate services and assist in reporting;

- **additional classroom support for teachers**, to assist in behavioural management so as to limit the disruption to normal classroom activities;

- **additional in-school support** to assist in the use of technologies designed to assist teaching and learning of students with disability;

- **additional resources** to enable teachers to undertake the time-consuming tasks of assessing learning needs, developing personalised learning plans, adapting the curriculum, and liaising with families and specialist assistance, including allied health professionals;

- **a strong policy commitment to collaboration** between government and non-government schools to facilitate access to services and expertise and to assist in the transition of students between sectors.

The evidence is clear that the investment of resources in these areas will deliver strong returns to the community, in terms of better education outcomes for students with disability and their classmates.

This funding would support the policy of inclusion whereby the majority of students with disability attend mainstream classes. The education of students with disability in mainstream schools represents a considerable saving in public expenditure—students with disability in special schools cost at least twice as much as average students.

These funds would be focused on primary schools which enable intervention to begin as early as possible and to be sustained through the primary years. Early diagnosis and intervention is the key to achieving better education outcomes for all students from a disadvantaged background, including students with disability.

The availability of appropriate assistance for students with disability in mainstream classes will have a positive impact on the performance of the remainder of the class.
7. Options for future funding and policy development

The rapid growth in the number of students with disability in the Catholic system in Queensland – a 92 per cent increase in six years – has placed excessive strain on schools’ recurrent resources. The inadequacy of funding caused by this escalation in numbers is exacerbated by the imbalance in funding between government and non-government schools for students with disability.

While the issues of adequacy and balance may both be addressed in funding arrangements to be agreed between the Commonwealth and the states for the next funding quadrennium, the outcome of those negotiations remains unclear as schools are beginning to plan for 2014, and the likelihood is that any increases in funding will be phased in over an extended period, leaving a continuing shortfall for several years yet. The future of specific purpose funding for students with disability from both the Commonwealth and the states remains unclear as new policies are developed and budgets finalised.

**Short term suggestions**

If currently enrolled students are not to miss out on needed support, some short-term solutions could be considered for 2014 to 2016, such as:

- Agreement by the Queensland Government to a pool of resources for students with disability in the state, to be divided proportionally between government and non-government schools, and to be applied flexibly to fund specialist assistance and classroom, administrative and technical support to meet the educational needs of students with disability and special learning needs.

- Additional funding to be provided in the State Special Needs Program for the specific purpose of resourcing schools so that teachers attempting to address the needs of students with disability and special learning needs have the necessary time to plan and prepare.

- Extension of the Advisory Visiting Teacher Program and a requirement that the program be administered in a collaborative, sector-blind way, so that resources and services are equally available to government and non-government schools.

These measures would address priority needs in Catholic schools and allow time to assess the impact of changed Commonwealth and state funding arrangements for schools. In the interim, they would make a significant difference to schooling outcomes for the large present cohort of students with disability in Queensland Catholic schools.
**Medium term suggestions**

In the medium term, as Commonwealth and state funding changes are implemented, involving additional loadings for students with disability and balanced provision between government and non-government schools, it will be necessary to keep the needs of students with disability under review and to assess the impact of new funding arrangements.

**Longer term suggestions**

In the longer term, all students are likely to benefit from state and Commonwealth investment in teacher quality initiatives, in particular the upgrading of teacher skills in special education and behaviour management through teacher education courses and professional development. The Queensland Government’s recent announcements to improve the quality of teachers indicate an awareness of the need for initiatives in this important area.

In addition, in the expectation that the number of students with disability is likely to continue to increase, albeit at a slower rate, the Queensland Government may like to consider developing a long term policy to respond to the educational needs of these students, wherever they attend school. Such a policy would need to be soundly based on recent research and a review of existing arrangements to understand what works best for different groups of students in different contexts, and should complement the support that is available under the *National Disability Insurance Scheme* (Disability Care).
References


Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2007, Young Australians: Their Health and Well Being, Canberra: AIHW


Gonski, D., (Chair), 2011, Review of Funding for Schooling, Report, Canberra: Australian Government

Prasser, S., 2009, Students with Disabilities in Queensland Independent Schools; Equality for All, A Discussion Paper prepared for Independent Schools Queensland, Brisbane, April


Productivity Commission, 2011, Disability Care and Support, Report 54, Canberra: Productivity Commission

Productivity Commission, 2012, Schools Workforce, Research Report, Canberra: Productivity Commission
