

**Submission on
draft for consultation
MCEETYA Action Plan 2009-2012**

March 2009



A national voice for families of children with a disability

Suite 2, 98 Morang Road, Hawthorn 3122
Phone (03) 9818 2000 or 0419 595 468

www.aafcd.org.au

The Australian Association for Families of Children with a Disability (AAFCD) is a national organisation representing children with a disability and their families and is funded through the Department of Families, Housing, Communities and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). We are a non-profit, community-based organisation. We work alongside families of children and young people with disability.

VISION

The vision of AAFCD is to provide children with a disability the opportunity to live meaningful and fulfilling lives within safe, supportive and appropriate environments. As part of this vision AAFCD's acknowledges the critical role that families play in providing the necessary care and support to children with a disability and recognises their need to be supported in this role. AAFCD will achieve this vision by:

1. **Educating** national public policy-makers and the broader community about the needs of children with a disability and their families.
2. **Advocating** on behalf of children with disability to ensure individual choices and the best possible support and services are available to them from government and the community.
3. **Informing** families about the rights and entitlements of the child with a disability to services and support.
4. **Celebrating** the successes and achievements of children with a disability.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The principles that guide the work of AAFCD are:

Children the priority: that the safety and well-being of children with disability is paramount and consistent with Australia's obligations under the international Convention on the Rights of the Child and the international Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Respect: for the views and interests of children with disability and their families.

Recognition: for contributions made by families to ensure the safety and well being of children with a disability.

Inclusion: to ensure that children with all types of disability, from all cultural and religious backgrounds and from different family structures are supported by the work of AAFCD.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES contd

Responsiveness: to ensure that full advantage is taken of strategic opportunities that arise from the political and social policy environment that benefit children with a disability.

Collaboration: with relevant non-government, government and private sector partners to promote the interests of children with a disability.

Transparency: within AAFCD's governance structures, decision-making processes, financial expenditure and reporting activities.

AAFCD welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, (MCEETYA) on the Action Plan 2009-2012 draft for consultation and to comment on the actions necessary to achieve the goals set out in the Melbourne Declaration.

AAFCD has a passionate commitment to advocate for the provision of high quality education for children with disability. Every child with disability should be provided with an education where they have the opportunity to realise their full potential and to be greatly enriched through the process.

The 2008 report 'Making Progress: the health and development of Australia's Children and Young People' states that in 2003, 440,300 (8%) young people aged 0-19 had a disability. Over 250,000 (6% of 5 –19 yr olds) were categorised as having schooling restrictions. This term refers to children and adolescents with disability who may experience schooling restrictions that result in needing special assistance, arrangements or equipment at school, attending special classes or a special school, needing frequent time off school or having difficulty with aspects of schoolwork or the school environment.

The publication further reported that "overall, people with disability achieve lower educational qualifications than people without disability, and often have poorer labour market outcomes. However, because the experience of disability stems from the interaction of individual and external factors, it is possible to reduce the impact of disability on the person's participation in all aspects of life through early intervention, and environmental and societal modifications." Education has a key role to play in breaking down the barriers which still exist in regard to disability.

Children with disability thus constitute a significant part of the 'education population'. They are a group who has specific and diverse needs. They

have a right to professional expertise that ensures every child's' needs are appropriately assessed and met. Quality education which allows a rich functional and academic curriculum is vital for all, including children with disability.

In addition, education, at all levels from early childhood to tertiary, has a vital role to play in achieving "inclusion". Education institutions are uniquely placed to set the scene for a new generation of Australians where not only should students with disability have their rights acknowledged in regard to equal access to education, but authentic inclusion flourishes. This vision involves students with disability being appropriately supported to enable them to make unique contributions to individual communities and in turn the wider society. It is the view of AAFCD that communities are greatly enriched through the active participation of children with disability.

Members of AAFCD are still too frequently confronted with situations in the educational sector where their children are subjected to discrimination, low expectations, limited resources and opportunities and poor quality support.

Developing stronger partnerships

AAFCD strongly supports the development of parental engagement strategies in line with the national Family-School Partnership Framework. Children with disability have diverse and specific needs and in our experience the family is a vital source in articulating these needs.

In addition, children with disability are often receiving services from a variety of sources, for example occupational therapy or speech therapy. These services are often an integral component of the educational setting. A strong partnership with families is reliant on excellent communication and is necessary to enable effective access, continuity of care and coordination of services and their inclusion in the educational program for children with disabilities.

AAFCD recommends that consideration be given to the unique factors which impact on children with disability and their families. The establishment of partnerships between schools and families needs to reflect these circumstances.

Supporting quality teaching and school leadership

Actions relating to this commitment should include a specific focus on disability. This would include the mandatory inclusion of training on disability related issues and special education in all pre-service teacher education.

The issue of recruitment of teachers is viewed as particularly problematic in the area of disability. Families of children with disabilities often report frequent staff turnover, lack of expertise in the area of working alongside their children and staff shortages within schools and other early childhood education settings. These issues are equally applicable to support staff in education i.e. integration aides and allied health professionals, who are essential to a team approach in achieving quality education for children with disabilities.

Actions need to encompass specific strategies and incentives to successfully address recruitment and retention issues of professionals involved in the education of children with disabilities.

Strengthening of early childhood education

AAFCD submitted a detailed response to the discussion paper on "The National Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care". In summary, the key issues identified by AAFCD were:

- inclusion support needed to be a key consideration for children with disability to enable access and inclusion to early childhood education;
- the individual and varied needs of children with disability needed to be a specific focus;
- adequate resources for children with disabilities need to be available;
- staff needed to receive appropriate and adequate training in relation to disability.

Enhancing middle years development

Actions need to incorporate the identification of issues which are specific to children with disability during this education stage and the adoption of appropriate strategies to meet identified needs. For some children with disability, transition through the middle years requires as much support as the transition from early childhood to primary. Effective transition is critical to ensure ongoing engagement and successful completion of their formal education.

Supporting senior years of schooling and youth transitions

Senior school must continue to provide all children with disability continued opportunities to grow their knowledge and skills in preparation for the next stage in their lives. Again it requires adequate resourcing to achieve such a reality. There is considerable focus on early childhood education and although it is acknowledged as a vital period of learning and development, it must not overshadow childrens' capacity to succeed in the senior years. Actions must include strategies that recognise, promote and provide senior students with a variety of meaningful learning opportunities to achieve their full potential. Children with disability have a right to access a range of post secondary options. Adequate information and support to transition from the secondary system into tertiary or other post secondary options is regarded as a key component to successful youth transition.

Promoting world-class curriculum and assessment

Specific consideration to ensuring that appropriate curriculum and assessment are available to children with disability is important. Specific attention must be given to ensuring the manner in which children with disability are educated can be accurately measured. In the case of children with disability, current uniform assessment does not provide evidence for effective evaluation to be undertaken and appropriate adjustments implemented.

AAFCD is of the opinion that a world-class curriculum is one which provides the flexibility to develop individualised learning goals that are measurable and relate the each student achieving their stated goals, irrespective of their level of ability.

Improving educational outcomes for indigenous youth and disadvantaged young Australians, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds

AAFCD supports the development of an education system which acknowledges, identifies and provides appropriate support to the diverse needs of all students. The philosophy behind articulating the myriad of individual lived experience of such a broad student population is understood, however the transition from policy to practice must ensure that the needs of children with disability are fully acknowledged and addressed. AAFCD believes that equating "disability" with "disadvantage" perpetuates the concept of deficiency rather than promoting ability.

Strengthening accountability and transparency

A common concern for families of children with disability is that their child is denied opportunities within education settings due to a focus on their perceived lack of ability thus creating unnecessarily low expectations. The situation must be prevented where low expectations are based on presumptions of a child's inability to achieve, due solely to the perception that the presence of an impairment is prohibitive. It is vital that education for children with disability has a very clear process for setting goals, promoting achievements and monitoring progress.



Elizabeth McGarry
Chief Executive Officer