

## AUSTRALIAN SPECIAL EDUCATION PRINCIPALS' ASSOCIATION

### Curriculum – Built In, Not Bolted On

#### Overview of Curriculum Research Findings and Recommendations 2003-2006 for Students With Special Education Needs.

#### 1. BACKGROUND

In September 2003 the Australian Special Education Principals Association (ASEPA) established a Curriculum Working Party to review the range of curriculum responses being developed in states/territories. In particular the ASEPA Executive Council identified the challenge of ensuring that all students (including students with disabilities/special needs) are recognised and catered for in curriculum options across Australia.

#### 2. SUMMARY STATEMENT

Positive reforms are being undertaken to meet the complex learning needs of students in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The Working Party identified a significant consensus from members regarding curriculum issues for students with Disabilities/Special Educational Needs (SEN). Whilst systems assume a theoretical responsibility for all students without exception, there is an ongoing tension that inclusion implies that all students will fit and be able to access the generic product, whilst providing curricula that is not broad enough to accommodate the needs of all students – therefore “all” does not in fact mean all. Strategic vision, research activities and national leadership in curriculum are missing for SEN. There are considerable variations state by state in how to authentically include all students. Curriculum does not provide supporting documents and resources that meet the full range of student and specific needs.

#### 3. PRESENT SITUATION

Many states/territories have undertaken curriculum reform in recent years and are now involved in a review period. ASEPA Working Party members through its state/territory affiliations have been involved in the various review processes.

#### 4. FINDINGS OF STATE CURRICULUM WORKING PARTY

4.1. It was found that there was significant consensus regarding the curriculum issues for students with special education needs including disabilities across all education systems.

- 4.2. All systems have assumed a theoretical responsibility for all students without exception, but struggle to resolve the tension between their aspirations for learning for
- 4.3. all and an authentic curriculum model. They are attempting to develop a generic product broad enough to accommodate the needs of all students where “*all does mean all*”.
- 4.4. The starter point for development appears to be the typical or average learner. Limited variations across dimensions of time and complexity are expected to accommodate the full range. This may be a reflection of an inaccurately grounded philosophical imperative that inclusion implies that all students will “*fit*” and be able to access the generic product and achieve an agreed upon common standard.
- 4.5. It was reported that in all systems there was a noticeable lack of strategic vision for special education generally and, in particular, for a shared understanding of future curriculum requirements. It was also noted that there was limited research activity devoted to exploring these issues and that national leadership in this area was missing.
- 4.6. There is considerable variation in the capacity of state/territory curricula to authentically include all students. The definitions of Key Priorities such as Literacy, Numeracy etc were seen to be narrowing rather than broadening and therefore less likely to cater for the full range of students (particularly Students With Disabilities). It was also observed that this narrowing reflected a very simplistic and unrealistic view of the possibility of one standard to suit all students. The needs of the testing regime were seen to be increasingly overshadowing the needs of all students for meaningful educational outcomes. Many students with significant disabilities are not able to meaningfully participate in the testing program and as a result have limited access to targeted support.
- 4.7. In all Australian systems, there is great uncertainty and inconsistency with respect to including students with disabilities/special education needs in the national testing regimes that are increasingly being mandated. There was however a desire from our profession for students with disabilities/special education needs to be authentically included in testing regimes and to receive the benefits that such procedures generate. Unlike the situation in other countries, there is presently no attempt to develop an agreed upon suite of alternative testing strategies that exhibits scientific rigour in the testing process. There was agreement that inclusive outcomes need to be achieved for all students across the full range of settings. Beyond the immediate testing objectives it was reported that common assessment tasks are not generally well developed for students with special needs including those with disabilities.

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## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.1. It is recommended that all state/territories, in their development of curriculum policies, procedures and programs ensure that equitable priority is given to the needs of students with disabilities/special needs and the schools in which they are enrolled. It is imperative to continue the national push for common language and definitions as a matter of urgency, provided that such definitions do not in themselves, become excluding. The curriculum needs of students with disabilities need to be built into curriculum and not bolted on as an afterthought.
- 5.2. In relation to curriculum improvement initiatives, all state/territory education departments apply a differentiated funding model according to need. Note: There is an urgent need to develop an Australian wide consensus regarding definitions of students with disabilities to ensure all identifiable cohorts are fully included, in curricula. This will ensure that the endless debates regarding differing interpretations of target groups can be resolved.
- 5.3. It is recommended that the Commonwealth Government resource a standing strategic capacity to
- Develop national strategic vision for students with disabilities and
  - Develop responsive curriculum policies, procedures and programs.
- 5.4. It is further recommended that ASEPA be supported to contribute to this leadership.
- 5.5. It is recommended that, given the validity of a school as a “field-based” platform, the Australian Government through an agency such as the Curriculum Corporation undertake to support research that would have national significance and applicability for this cohort of students. The development of Curriculum Learning/Research hubs in key – school based locations across Australian would generate an efficient and effective curriculum support for schools.
- 5.6. It is recommended the complications inherent in these finding be a priority of the research capacity to be developed through Recommendation 5.3. It is observed that the barriers to achieving consensus will be overcome only if historical sectional and parochial issues can be avoided.
- 5.7. It is recommended that national assessment guidelines be developed which reflect the needs of all students so that the present testing tensions resulting in exemptions from testing or invalid testing, are removed. It is further observed that assessment tasks should reflect the real life tasks and desirable outcomes for these students.

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## 6. CONTACT DETAILS

This was a longitudinal research paper involving school based principals/leaders in all state/territories across Australia. Included in this paper are the key findings and recommendations. Further information on the research can be obtained from John Enchelmaier Vice-President ASEPA e-mail: [jench1@eq.edu.au](mailto:jench1@eq.edu.au) or Peter Davis President ASEPA e-mail: [pdavi16@eq.edu.au](mailto:pdavi16@eq.edu.au)

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