

# SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH COMPLEX NEEDS

Increasing numbers of students with complex needs are being catered for in mainstream classrooms using existing resources. “Complex needs” refers to students who face multiple, interconnected challenges that impact learning, development, or well-being. These students require a multifaceted, coordinated approach involving specialised interventions, personalised learning plans, and collaboration among educators, families, and healthcare professionals.

## KEY AREAS OF HIGH NEEDS

- 1 Special Educational Needs:** These students may have physical, emotional, cognitive disabilities, or giftedness, requiring tailored plans and resources.
- 2 Behavioural or Emotional Challenges:** Students exhibiting aggressive or oppositional behaviours that affect learning and social interaction, including school refusal.
- 3 Health Issues:** Students with chronic illnesses affecting attendance and engagement in school activities.
- 4 Socio-economic Disadvantages:** Students lacking access to early interventions or external support services outside of school.
- 5 Diverse Backgrounds:** Students requiring specialized support, including those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, LGBTQI+, remote students, students in out-of-home care, and refugee students.
- 6 Neurodiverse Students:** Students with neurodevelopmental disorders requiring specialized interventions.

Furthermore, many students come from families with complex needs, dealing with mental health issues, disabilities, substance use, domestic violence, or poverty. Schools attempt to build parents’ capabilities and connect them to appropriate external supports.

## EARLY INTERVENTION: A KEY STRATEGY

APPA advocates for a fundamental shift toward early intervention during primary education. Investing in resources for primary schools—such as human, physical, and financial support—can significantly improve long-term outcomes. Primary education is a crucial period for developing healthy learning habits and engaging parents in their child’s education.

## SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES

Schools invest time and energy in building partnerships with families to support student success. However, understanding the broader social determinants that contribute to unmet needs is crucial for effective support. The **Disability Standards for Education (2005)** require schools to provide reasonable adjustments to meet the needs of students with disabilities, and families need broader support to address socioeconomic, health, and housing factors that impact engagement.

## FIT-FOR-PURPOSE FACILITIES

Schools must have dedicated facilities to host allied health staff and provide interventions. These include therapy rooms, quiet zones, and sensory spaces that support students’ regulation needs. Under the **Australian Disability Discrimination Act (1992)**, schools are required to ensure facilities are accessible and inclusive. Specialised equipment, adjustable furniture, and assistive technology must be readily available to support collaboration between educators and allied health professionals. ▶

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION

- 1 Responsive Needs-Based Funding Model:** Funding must be based on student needs, using the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) as a guide. This model would eliminate the need for repeated diagnostic processes, reducing wait times for students to access specialist services. However, it is important to recognise that the NCCD does not capture all complexities of student needs. The NCCD collects data on students with disabilities but does not directly dictate funding amounts. The NCCD informs the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS), but actual funding depends on factors like state and federal agreements, school location, and the sector (public, private, or Catholic). It is crucial that funding allocated through the NCCD for a student reaches that student locally. Models like “extensive plus” (NSW and QLD) could better address the full range of additional support needs.
- 2 Increased Funding for Primary Schools:** Enhanced funding is essential to enable greater staffing flexibility, including hiring more school psychologists, intervention specialists, social workers, and speech pathologists. This funding should also support specialised training for staff and resources for parents to enable early intervention strategies. Addressing problems in primary education is more cost-effective than solving them later in secondary schooling.
- 3 Enhanced Professional Development:** Teachers and support staff need increased access to specialised training in areas such as mental health, trauma-informed practices, and behaviour management. Providing professional development opportunities aligned with current policies will reduce schools’ reliance on external providers and allow better allocation of school budgets.
- 4 Increased Access to Specialist Professionals:** Schools, particularly in regional and remote areas, need more frequent and responsive access to specialist staff. This workforce should be part of a whole-of-government effort to observe students, collaborate with stakeholders, and develop tailored support plans.
- 5 Integrated Approach Across Departments:** A holistic approach is needed to align efforts across Education, Health, Communities, and Justice departments. Schools often manage complex student needs in isolation, and improved collaboration across these agencies can ensure more comprehensive support for students and families.
- 6 Support for School Leaders:** Additional support is necessary for school leaders in managing complex parent and student needs. Leaders cannot assume the role of “Practice Manager,” and current case management demands require a review of existing funding models.

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## CONCLUSION

**APPA calls for the prioritising of early intervention and adequate resources for primary schools to improve outcomes for students with high needs.** A coordinated effort across all stakeholders—government, schools, families, and community organisations—is critical to ensure that these students receive the support they need to succeed. Currently, the goodwill of teachers and school leaders acts as the safety net for vulnerable children, but this is neither sustainable nor acceptable. Addressing these challenges with responsive resources will ensure schools can lead problem-solving efforts and provide meaningful support for Australia’s most vulnerable students.