

Disillusion and Delay

CYDA's survey of the learning experiences of children and young people with disability in 2024.

**“I’ve really had to fight for
my right to education”**

(Young person with disability, youth education survey, 2024)



Children and Young People
with Disability Australia

Authorised by:

Skye Kakoschke-Moore, Chief Executive Office

Contact details:

Children and Young People with Disability Australia

E.skye@cyda.org.au

P. 03 94171025

W. www.cyda.org.au

Authors:

Lauren Riessen, Project Coordinator – Inclusive Education

Detailed Reports

1. Smith, C., Hart, J., Dickinson, H. (2025) *“I’ve really had to fight for my right to education”*: Australia’s education system from the perspective of students with disability. CYDA Youth Education Survey 2025. Report prepared for Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), Melbourne.

2. Smith, C., Hart, J., Dickinson, H. (2025) *“They lowered the bar rather than raise the child”*: CYDA Parent and Caregiver Education Survey 2024. CYDA Youth Education Survey 2025. Report prepared for Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), Melbourne.



Content note: *References to bullying, violence, harm and abuse*

Acknowledgements:

Children and Young People with Disability Australia would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which this report has been written, reviewed and produced, whose cultures and customs have nurtured and continue to nurture this land since the Dreamtime. This is, was and always will be Aboriginal land.



Our Surveys

Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) is the national representative organisation for children and young people with disability aged 0 to 25 years. CYDA has an extensive national membership of disability, families and caregivers of children with disability, and advocacy and community organisations.

CYDA conducted two surveys during 2024 and 2025:

1. Youth Education Survey 2024-25 - for students with disability who are at school or who have recently left or finished school.
2. Education Survey 2024-25 - for families and caregivers of children and young people in school

CYDA partnered with researchers from the Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne and Public Service Research Group, UNSW Canberra to analyse the data and prepare each of the three reports.

These surveys and resulting reports are part of CYDA's ongoing commitment to understanding the experience of children and young people with disability in Australia.

The title of this document 'Disillusion and delays' reflects the current state of inclusive education in Australia. Despite ongoing advocacy spanning three decades, and recommendations from the Disability Royal Commission, the discriminatory status quo remains firmly entrenched. The 2024-25 survey results reflect little to no change from prior years. This document is a call to action, outlining the key areas of concern and priority for our children and young people with disability, and those who care for and support them.



Disillusion and delays

What We Learned

Below we have included the key takeaways from both surveys as reported by children, young people and their families.

From our Youth Survey:

Exclusion from activities – 72% of survey participants reported being excluded from activities at school. This highlights a pervasive lack of social and extracurricular inclusion and an ongoing lack of opportunities for meaningful engagement.

Bullying linked to disability – 73% of survey participants reported experiencing of bullying, an increasingly prevalent experience, exacerbating mental health and emotional wellbeing concerns

Student voice in IEPs – Although ‘Individual Education Plans’ (IEPs)¹ should be tailored plans, most students reported they have not been actively involved in shaping their own plans with only 39% reporting involvement in this process.

Teacher training gaps – Nearly half of survey participants felt teachers and staff lacked adequate knowledge and training to support students effectively.

Supportive Culture – Only 36% felt their schools had genuinely embraced inclusivity, with accommodations often described as inconsistent or inadequate.

¹ Individual Education Plans (IEP), sometimes known as an Individual Learning Plans (ILP), are personalised plans created with the school that help individuals with their learning. IEPs can include goals, adjustments and strategies for learning. They may also include different preferences and needs of the student.

What We Learned

Similar concerns were reported in the parent survey:

Exclusion from activities – 57% survey participants noted their child had experienced exclusion from school activities such as excursions or events.

Bullying Impact – 60% reported their child had experienced bullying, including physical, psychological, social, or cyber forms, which impacted mental health and wellbeing.

Individual Education Plans (IEPs) – superficial compliance without substance - while widely implemented 72% of survey participants reportedly having plans in place), IEPs continued to lack personalisation and effective execution in classrooms.

Teacher training gaps – 26% felt there was a gap in knowledge, understanding and relevant skills, undermining both student outcomes and educators' confidence and leading to reactive rather than proactive supports.

Supportive Culture – 48% agreed their child was made to feel welcome at school, with a similar proportion (46%) feeling parents and caregivers were welcomed.



We also discovered

Additional concerns reported in the Family and Caregiver Survey:

Disproportionate disciplinary practices

21% of respondents reported their child had been suspended within the past year, notably, 27% had faced disciplinary absences involving restricted school hours.

Continued restrictive practices

Restrictive practices were reported by 29% of respondents, involving concerning incidents of restraint and seclusion. These practices were described as traumatic, severely impacting students' emotional and psychological wellbeing, with some respondents reporting enduring negative effects such as ongoing anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Broken complaint systems

The survey highlights dissatisfaction with existing complaints processes. Over half of respondents had lodged formal complaints about school-related issues, primarily relating to student support, bullying, harassment, or victimisation.

Only 18% of those lodging complaints felt satisfied with the outcomes. Many parents and caregivers refrained from making complaints due to fear of negative repercussions.

Parent advocacy burnout

A dominant theme in free text responses was the considerable burden on parents and caregivers to continually advocate for basic educational support, often at substantial emotional, financial, and personal cost.

Mental health crisis among students

Distressing experiences, including bullying, restrictive practices, exclusionary practices leading to severe emotional outcomes, including self-harm and suicidal ideation among students, underline the urgent need for comprehensive systemic improvements.

Education alternatives as a last resort

Lack of inclusive practices in education system led to parents engaging in distance education or home schooling as necessary solutions, rather than preferred options.



Ongoing Trends

Both these surveys and CYDA's previous Education surveys², yet again, describe **systemic failings, and they are not isolated incidents**.

Although previous CYDA education surveys may have had different participants, the 2024 survey shows that the educational experiences of students with disability have seen **little meaningful improvement** in recent years

In many cases the patterns of exclusion and isolation seen in previous surveys have not improved. These experiences reinforce that transformation to a truly inclusive **education system, requires more than policies on paper**.

Improvement in key areas such as reduction in bullying, inclusive practice, resource allocation, and educational supports remain largely stagnant, indicating **persistent systemic gaps** and the absence of strategic progress towards genuinely inclusive education.

The Disability Royal Commission³ made **fifteen clear recommendations** specific to inclusive education, outlining 15 areas requiring urgent attention for change to support a more inclusive education system in Australia, **we are yet to see any meaningful movement or change** in the education system, with funding instead being directed to further segregated settings across several states.

Overall, low expectations for academic, social and vocational outcomes were reported for students with disability....these general assumptions risked being pervasive, setting the tone for the attitudes and behaviours across the school.

...respondents explained they were required to 'push' their way into the school, rather than be 'pulled' in by the school on the basis that the lived experience of parents and caregivers was an asset that should shape the approach to supports.⁴

² [Disappointment and discrimination: CYDA's surveys of the learning experiences of children and young people with disability in 2022 and 2023 - CYDA](#)
[How deep does it go? Australian students with disability and their experience of entrenched inequity in education - CYDA](#)

["I think the teachers need more help" - Voices of experience from students with disability in Australia - CYDA](#)

³ [Final Report | Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability](#)

⁴ Dr Smith et.al. 2025 'They lowered the bar rather than raise the child'. CYDA Parent and Caregiver Education Survey 2024.



Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Strengthen school mechanisms supporting inclusion

CYDA calls on all Australian governments – federal, state, territory and local - to utilise existing frameworks and legislation to improve the experience and outcomes of development, learning and education for children with disability.

- **Development of Nationally consistent requirements for Individual Education Plans.** Supporting genuinely collaborative development of IEPs with commitment to engagement in reviewing effectiveness of implemented strategies.
- **Improving data and reporting systems to get a clearer picture of bullying, segregation, and exclusion, especially for students with disability**
- **Development of nationally consistent reporting requirements** to address the widespread use of restrictive practices (similar to requirements under the NDIS⁵)
- **Better coordination and funding clarity** between the NDIS and schools to ensure students receive the supports they are entitled to.

Recommendation 2: Implement a National Roadmap to Inclusive Education

CYDA calls on all Australian governments to implement a National Roadmap to Inclusive Education that outlines required steps for all states and territories to work towards to ensure a fully inclusive education system.

- **Utilise expertise in inclusive education** in the development of a National Roadmap including **consulting and codesigning** with ACIE (developers of Roadmap '*Driving change: A roadmap for achieving inclusive education in Australia*'⁶), Inclusive Educators Australia and Australian education academics.
- Deliver a clear, funded plan to transform our education system and **make sure every student is included and supported**.
- Ensure inclusion is a **core part of teacher training and ongoing professional development** for teachers.
- **Set up for success**, by gathering better data to track real progress.
- Implement an **independent oversight body** to ensure that all levels of education providers are meeting their statutory and legal obligations and complaints can be independently investigated, monitored and resolved.

⁵ [Regulated Restrictive Practices Guide](#)

⁶ [ACIE Roadmap – Back to top](#)

Recommendation 3: Invest in training, support and professional development

CYDA calls on all Australian governments to invest further in training and support for the professionals in the education sector.

- **Provide teacher training and development** to ensure all teachers meet their obligations under the Disability Standards for Education (DSE) and that they can effectively guarantee students and families are informed of their rights under the DSE and have those rights upheld.
- **Integrate compulsory inclusive education** components into every education degree that qualifies graduates for teacher registration.



Case Study -

Family and Caregiver Survey – Child aged 7-9 years, NDIS participant, Regional NSW.

This family described feeling unwelcome at their child's school — and said their child feels the same way. They reported that their child is not receiving the support they need to learn, participate, or feel included.

In the past school year, their child was excluded from a whole-class excursion. The family said their child was not even given the chance to go.

They shared troubling experiences of bullying, including hurtful comments from staff such as:

'the only thing [their child] is good at is getting angry'

The family reported being asked to pick up their child early on multiple occasions due to behavioural concerns, receiving several suspensions, and even being pressured by the school to reduce their child's attendance hours.

While their child has an Individual Education Plan (IEP), the family felt shut out of the process:

'We were given a 15 minute meeting where we were presented with an already completed plan...'

'The school actively rejected approaches and adjustments provided by ourselves and our professional therapists'

This family's story highlights the deep impact that exclusion, lack of support, and limited collaboration can have on a child's education and wellbeing.



Case Study -

Family and Caregiver Survey: Child aged 13-15 years, NDIS participant, Victoria.

The participant stated:

I am an ex teacher. I know how the system works and I know most of the schools in the area or people who have experience in most of the schools.

They reported that their child had experienced bullying, seclusion and:

6 months in a public school were spent being punished for adhd behaviours which spiralled and became worse due to the constant punishments...The more she was punished at the state school the worse her friendships became. The year level coordinator told multiple parents not to let their children hang out with her.

This family also reported experiences of gatekeeping:

The private school called and told us there was a place and she could start the following week. I then had a second phone call asking why she was moving schools. When I said she had adhd the response was “does she take medication?” And “can the other kids tell she has adhd?” We then didn’t hear back from them ... If we hadn’t been desperate to move her I wouldn’t have sent her there.

Their child had an IEP, but only due to ongoing parental advocacy:

We argued and fought for an IEP for 18 months at the state school. We had reached the point where it was being written because we brought in an advocate but by that point our child was not attending school at all so we left.

I requested a IEP ... The first plan created was a behaviour plan that was a list of rules and if she didn’t follow them what the consequences would beEven after we had 3 letters written by her GP, paediatrician and psychologist saying they were causing her psychological harm the school refused to meet with us.



Individualised Education Plans

Quotes from surveys regarding IEPs:

Children and Young People Survey:

Recently graduated, Victoria

I was basically told what it [IEP] was and asked if I agreed to it... It was too little too late by the time I got one

Recently graduated, WA.

While I was involved in making my IEP, the school often went against my doctor's recommendations. Teachers often did not follow my IEP as they believed they knew better. The coordinator at school told me that scsa would not grant my accommodations so I did not deserve them in the classroom. Scsa granted all requested accommodations. I had teacher pulling me out of class to explain why they did not want to follow the iep, and believed it wasn't necessary.

Family and Caregiver Survey:

Parent of child aged 7-9 in regional Tasmania:

They listened then disregarded or changed the recommendations or just completely misunderstood and that was after meeting after endless meetings with all the therapists... such a waste of time and money.... We home educate now after the dreadful experiences with two schools.

Parent of child aged 16-18 in Victoria:

The school claim (verbally and in writing) that they develop the IEP with the student as a relationship building exercise and therefore can't include the parent. My child says she has never been included in developing a plan. When I refused to sign an IEP in 2024 because it was so ridiculous, the teacher forged my signature. I had the signature removed but never got an apology.

Parent of child aged 13-15 in regional QLD:

The psychologist wrote recommendations to the school to follow. The school did not follow these recommendations... He left school and I started homeschooling him



Reports and resources

Smith, C., Hart, J., Dickinson, H. (2025) *“I’ve really had to fight for my right to education”*: Australia’s education system from the perspective of students with disability. CYDA Youth Education Survey 2025. Report prepared for Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), Melbourne.

Smith, C., Hart, J., Dickinson, H. (2025) *“They lowered the bar rather than raise the child”*: CYDA Parent and Caregiver Education Survey 2024. CYDA Youth Education Survey 2025. Report prepared for Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), Melbourne.

[CYDA’s submission to the Anti-Bullying Rapid Review, 2025](#)

Children and Young People with Disability Australia

Suite 8, 134 Cambridge Street Collingwood VIC 3066

PO Box 172, Clifton Hill VIC 3068

Phone 03 9417 1025 or

1800 222 660 (regional or interstate)

Email info@cyda.org.au

ABN 42 140 529 273

Facebook: www.facebook.com/CydaAu

Twitter: @CydaAu

Instagram: cydaaus

cyda.org.au



Children and Young People
with Disability Australia