

**“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 2024

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Children and Young People
with Disability Australia



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Content note:

Discussion of examples of ableism, discrimination, abuse, physical and cyber bullying, and suicidal ideation

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Executive summary



Background

Research consistently shows that students with disability in Australia experience significant disadvantages in education compared to their peers. Despite various educational reforms, students with disability continue to face higher rates of segregation, suspension, expulsion, and lower levels of educational attainment. These inequalities have long-term consequences, affecting employment prospects, social inclusion, and overall wellbeing.

About this survey

Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) has been gathering feedback on educational experiences from its members via formal surveys since 2010. These surveys have consistently found that students with disability are excluded in their education. This is the second time that CYDA has run a survey specifically focusing on the voices and perspectives of children and young people in education. Prior surveys have elicited some responses from this group but have tended to be primarily completed by families and caregivers.

Survey questions were about the types of services and supports accessed, how welcoming and supportive schools are, whether students experience exclusion and bullying and how well-equipped teachers and schools are perceived to be in meeting the needs of students with disability. Responses were collected from December 2024 to March 2025. CYDA partnered with researchers from the Melbourne Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne and the Public Service Research Group, UNSW Canberra to analyse the data and prepare this report.

Results

Findings from this survey indicate persistent and troubling issues of exclusion, bullying, inadequate support, and systemic challenges for students with disability:

Exclusion and bullying

- 72% of respondents reported experiencing exclusion from school activities. Respondents highlighted social isolation and lack of opportunities for meaningful engagement.
- 73% of respondents experienced bullying, reflecting a slight increase from previous surveys. Bullying was often linked explicitly to disability, exacerbating mental health and emotional wellbeing issues.

Individual Education Plans and supports

- While 75% of students were aware of an Individual Education Plans (referred to as IEP/IEPs), only 58% had ever had one developed. Just 39% of these students participated meaningfully in creating their own IEP, suggesting plans often do not fully reflect individual needs and preferences.

- Respondents described variable effectiveness of IEPs, with many indicating a lack of genuine collaborative development and implementation, limiting their overall helpfulness.

Teacher preparedness and school culture

- Nearly half of respondents felt teachers and staff lacked adequate knowledge and training to support students effectively.
- Only 36% of respondents felt their schools had genuinely supportive cultures around disability, and many reported inconsistent or inadequate accommodations, particularly as they progressed into later school years.

Reasons for early school leaving

- Respondents frequently cited systemic issues such as inaccessibility, insufficient support, chronic bullying, negative interactions with educators, and overwhelming academic pressures as reasons for prematurely leaving school.

Alternative education pathways

- For several students, alternative education options such as distance education, online learning, or homeschooling became critical pathways due to unsupportive traditional school environments. These alternatives provided flexible and more inclusive settings.

Conclusions and recommendations

The findings highlight critical areas requiring immediate attention:

- Schools must prioritise robust anti-bullying programs and proactive inclusion policies, ensuring active engagement and regular training for educators.
- Development and implementation of IEPs must become genuinely collaborative and reflective of individual student needs, backed by thorough training and ongoing professional development for teachers.
- School leadership must demonstrate genuine commitment to inclusive cultures, actively addressing systemic barriers and ensuring all staff are equipped to support students with disability effectively.
- Greater awareness and adherence to the Disability Standards for Education are necessary to empower students and families to advocate effectively for their rights and needed accommodations.
- Addressing these systemic issues through coordinated policy actions, comprehensive educator training, effective leadership, and inclusive practices can enhance the educational experiences and outcomes for students with disability.

Limitations

Limitations of this research include that it represents a relatively small sample of 118 students with disability, and not everyone answered all the questions in the survey. However, free text responses offered additional insights into these results, and these were analysed to support interpretation of quantitative findings.

The survey was designed to be similar in approach to those conducted previously with parents to explore whether disabled students experience the same types of issues as caregivers report. However, some of the language in the survey may have been less familiar to children and young people and would benefit from better targeting in future iterations. Furthermore, 78% of respondents were from Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales meaning there was not proportional representation across all Australian states and territories. For these reasons, we should be careful not to assume that the responses to this survey are necessarily reflective of the issues encountered in the education of students with disability in Australia.

Introduction



Australians with disability still experience significant inequalities in education despite years of reform to disability policy and disability services. Students with disability are more likely to leave school early, less likely to complete year 12 and less likely to gain a university degree (1, 2). Further reform will be needed to address the systemic barriers that exacerbate these inequalities. Yet there is a surprising lack of data that focuses on the voices of children and young people and reports their experiences within educational systems.

This report presents findings from Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA)'s online National Education Survey, which focuses on educational experiences and challenges encountered by this demographic. Disparities in education are important because they have long-term implications such as greater rates of poverty, lower levels of employment, higher rates of underemployment, and greater social isolation among people with disability.

Australia's Disability Strategy (3, p. 22) notes that "*Despite educational reforms over the last decade, there remain significant gaps for students with disability. These gaps are notable in attainment of Year 12 or equivalent, vocational education and training qualifications, and participation in university studies*". Within the education and learning component of this strategy, priority two focuses on building capability in the delivery of inclusive education to improve educational outcomes for school students with disability. The Productivity Commission study report on their review of the National School Reform Agreement also notes that there are persistent gaps in education outcomes for some cohorts of students, which are generated by systemic barriers (4). Concerningly, they note that these gaps cannot be measured for students with disability despite being identified as a priority cohort due to a lack of consistent data tracking of educational outcomes.

Research evidence consistently demonstrates that students with disability fare less well than their peers in education. Students with disability are segregated, suspended, and expelled at higher rates. Over the last fifteen years, the highest level of educational attainment for children and young people with disability has improved, but this level still remains lower than those without disability (1). These inequities can have lifelong implications. Research shows that people with disability are more likely to experience poverty, are less likely to be in work, and more likely to be socially isolated (5-8).

CYDA is the national representative organisation for children and young people (aged 0-25) with disability. CYDA is a not-for-profit community organisation that provides a link from the direct experiences of children and young people with disability and their families to federal government and other key stakeholders. CYDA has gathered feedback on educational experiences from its members via formal surveys since 2010 (9). CYDA's National Education Survey began in 2015 to deepen this understanding of the kinds of issues students face in education systems. These surveys have consistently found that students with disability are excluded in their education.

This is the second time CYDA has run a survey to specifically focus on the voices and perspectives of children and young people with disability in education. Prior

surveys have elicited some responses from this group but have tended to be primarily completed by families and caregivers.

While data are published by organisations such as the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) about issues such as which schools students with disability attend, disparities in educational attainment and difficulties experienced at school, this is the only survey that seeks to explore the experiences of students with disability within education. These experiences will also not be reported through the Better and Fairer schools funding agreement. This survey is specifically designed to elicit the voices of students about their educational experiences. While it is a smaller sample size than studies from organisations like the AIHW, it provides a crucial insight into the lived experience of students with disability in Australian schools.

This report provides a detailed analysis of the educational experiences of students with disability in Australia, based on the findings from the CYDA Youth Education Survey 2024. Initially, it sets the stage by reviewing relevant inclusive education policies and legislation in Australia, contextualizing the survey within current research evidence. The report then explains the methodology, including the development of survey questions, and methods of survey distribution and analysis.

The report then presents demographic information about survey participants, including geographic distribution, age ranges, types of disability, and educational settings. These details are critical for accurately interpreting the survey findings. Following the demographic overview, the report explores respondents' general perceptions of their school experiences, focusing on elements such as support, inclusion, and their interactions with educators regarding future opportunities and accommodations provided by schools.

Subsequently, the report highlights the issues of exclusion and bullying faced by students with disability. It presents quantitative data on the prevalence of these experiences alongside qualitative narratives from respondents, underscoring the profound impact these experiences have on their mental health, social integration, and educational participation.

The effectiveness and implementation of IEPs and other learning supports are then examined. The section discusses student involvement in creating IEPs, the practical effectiveness of these plans, and whether accommodations provided genuinely meet students' needs.

Additionally, the report investigates the various factors contributing to early school leaving among students with disability. It identifies systemic barriers, interpersonal conflicts, accessibility issues, bullying, inadequate support, and health-related concerns as reasons prompting students to exit school prematurely. Alternative education pathways, such as online learning, distance education, and homeschooling, are explored as critical alternatives for students who have faced considerable challenges within traditional educational environments.

Three focused discussions integrate the survey findings with scholarly literature. They cover critical themes related to IEPs and supports, exclusion and bullying

experiences, and broader systemic issues influencing students' overall experiences and decisions to leave school early.

Drawing from the insights of children and young people in the survey and current academic research, the report concludes with a series of actionable recommendations designed to improve inclusivity, teacher preparedness, leadership effectiveness, accessibility, mental health support, and empowerment of student advocacy within educational environments. The final section summarizes key findings and emphasises the urgent need for systemic reforms to ensure inclusive and supportive educational experiences for students with disability in Australia.

Background and approach



Australia was one of the first signatories to the United National Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities in 2006, which obliges the provision of accommodations and support to access the general educational system 'on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live'. Federally the Disability Discrimination Act 1992, the Education Act 1989 and the Disability Standards for Education 2005 (Reviewed 2015) have followed broader trends in many advanced economies moving policy towards a more inclusive, less segregated approach to the full involvement of students with diagnosed intellectual, physical, sensory or learning disability into mainstream classes.

There is a strong evidence base to suggest that inclusive education is beneficial not only for students with disability, but all students (10). Inclusive education is guided by an understanding about reasonable adjustments, which stipulates that a teacher or school make adjustments that enable a student with disability to participate in the classroom and demonstrate their learning while not placing an unnecessary burden on the student, their peers or their teacher.

Despite the various commitments to inclusive education, a range of reviews and reports (e.g. (11-15) note that students with disability in all schools still experience inequities. Outside of issues relating to academic attainment we see students face challenges such as teacher preparedness to deal with students with disability (16-19), a high likelihood of being bullied (20-22), and experiences of exclusion and rejection (23). This is a problematic situation given that the research evidence demonstrates that students with disability who attend education in inclusive mainstream settings demonstrate positive gains in social competence, friendships, aspirations for livelihoods and independence in adulthood, some gains in access to broad curriculum, and more access to academic skills (2), with additional benefits evidenced for their non disabled peers and teachers (24). Inequities in education can have lifelong implications. Research shows that people with disability are more likely to experience poverty, are less likely to be in work, and more likely to be socially isolated (6, 25, 26).

This research is part of CYDA's ongoing commitment to understanding the experience of students with disability in Australia. This survey focuses on the voices of children and young people with disability. A separate report provides insight into the views of families and caregivers. Taken together these give a comprehensive view into the experiences and challenges of students with disability in education. The respondents to this survey represent a diverse group of students, with varying impairments and educational backgrounds. The survey includes students from both primary and secondary school levels, as well as those who have transitioned to distance education or homeschooling. The experiences shared span across different types of schools, including public, Catholic, and independent institutions.

The survey asked a range of questions relating to the demographic circumstances of students, the types of services and supports accessed, perceptions of resources available and training of professionals, whether students have experienced exclusion, seclusion or bullying, and experiences with making complaints. The survey was launched on 9 December 2024 and stayed open until 3 March 2025, with the majority of responses received during February 2025.

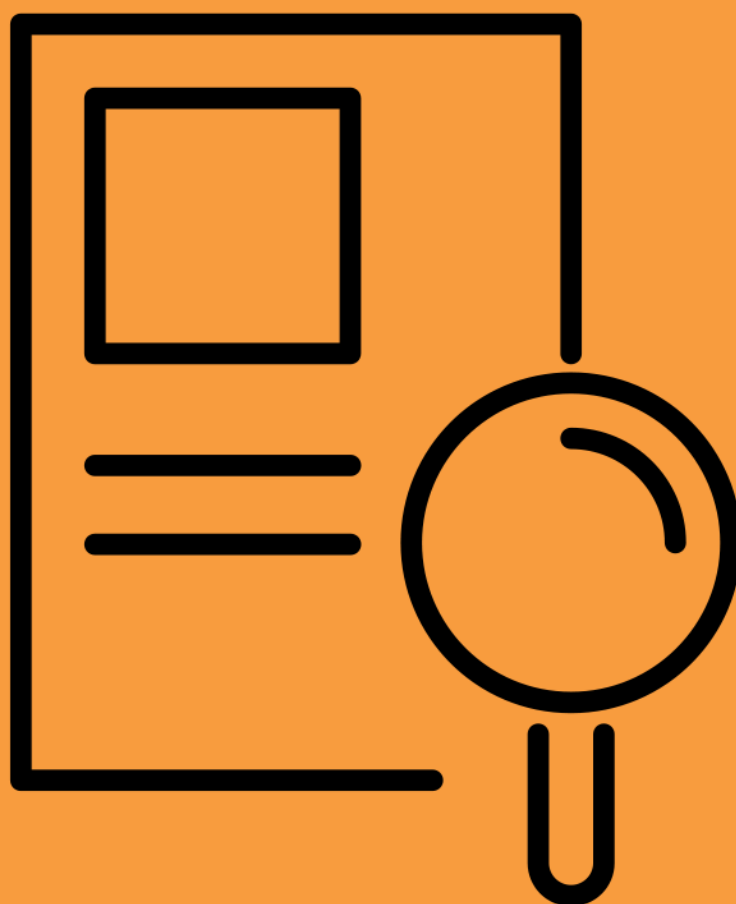
CYDA sought the assistance of researchers from the Melbourne Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne and the Public Service Research Group, UNSW Canberra to analyse survey data and prepare this report.

While the survey received 118 individual responses, figures in tables may not always add up to 118, because some respondents skipped some questions, and for some questions respondents were able to select multiple answers. We report quantitative findings in relation to raw numbers of participants who responded to each question, with percentages where appropriate (expressed as a percentage of responses rather than total participants). Due to rounding, percentages may not always add up to 100. For most questions, qualitative data provided in text boxes helped to explain reasons for particular responses or provided additional relevant experiences and insights. As a result, participants reported on a wide range of topics, including experiences of bullying, social interactions, academic support, and overall school climate. Many respondents shared instances of bullying, with forms ranging from verbal taunts to physical aggression. Some noted that these experiences were directly related to their disability, while others reported general bullying not specifically tied to their condition.

Following the previous survey, CYDA convened a focus group with a number of young people with disability to gain feedback on the structure of the survey and the accessibility of questions. As a result of this some of the survey questions were changed so it is not identical to the previous iteration. Where possible we have compared findings gathered in this survey against those from the 2022 survey (27). To demonstrate the spread of responses from different respondents we have given each respondent a Respondent ID (e.g. Respondent 10), included at the end of each quote.

Importantly, this survey gives agency to children and young people with disability, allowing them to articulate their own experiences and needs within the education system. Their responses paint a nuanced picture of the current state of inclusive education in Australia, revealing both progress made and areas still requiring significant improvement. This data serves as a tool for educators, policymakers, and advocates working to create more inclusive and supportive learning environments for all students.

Findings



Demographics of survey responses

Respondents were asked what age they are. As shown in Table 1, responses were received from all age groups, with the majority in age groups over 13. Respondents were asked if they received help in completing the survey. While 16% did, 84% completed the survey without assistance. This assistance primarily came from mothers (35%), but 53% also came from family and parents (7%).

Table 1: Respondent age

Respondent	No	Percentage
10-12 years	3	3%
13-15 years	20	17%
16-18 years	43	36%
19-25 years	51	43%
Under 10 years	1	1%
Grand total	118	100%

In terms of where these students were located, as Table 2 shows, respondents were located across all states and territories, but with the majority across the Eastern states. Tasmania and the Northern Territory were particularly underrepresented. This response rate is broadly consistent with the prior survey with the exception of a reduction in the count of respondents from Queensland (27).

Table 2: Respondent State or Territory of residence

Respondent	No	Percentage
NSW	39	33%
VIC	37	31%
QLD	17	14%
WA	12	10%
SA	6	5%
ACT	5	4%
NT	1	1%
TAS	1	1%
Grand total	118	100%

As Table 3 demonstrates, the majority of respondents are located in metropolitan areas, although there is representation across all area types.

Table 3: Respondent area of residence

Respondent	No	Percentage
Major city, such as Adelaide, Brisbane, Canberra, Darwin, Hobart, Melbourne, Sydney or Perth	71	60%
Regional area within 4 hour drive of a major city	35	30%
Rural or remote area further than 4 hour drive from a major city	7	6%
Not sure	5	4%

Grand total	118	100%
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In terms of the gender identity of respondents, males and females responded at a relatively similar level, but with 14% of students identifying as non-binary (Table 4).

Table 4: Respondent gender identity

Respondent	No	Percentage
Boy	12	10%
Girl	13	11%
Man	22	19%
Woman	45	38%
Non-binary	16	14%
Do not want to answer	5	4%
Other	5	4%
Grand total	118	100%

The vast majority of respondents (86%) are from English speaking backgrounds, with 14% reporting that they come from non-English speaking backgrounds. Similarly, 90% of respondents do not have an Aboriginal or Torres Strait background, while 6% do.

Most respondents (90%) reported a disability diagnosis. For those with a diagnosis, 47% had been diagnosed for less than 10 years, while a further 25% had been diagnosed for more than 10 years. These findings are likely reflective of the age profile of respondents (refer Table 1).

Table 5: Respondent diagnosed disability profile

Respondent	No	Percentage
From birth	25	22%
Less than 10 years	53	47%
More than 10 years	28	25%
None of the above	6	5%
Grand total	112	100%

Half of respondents reported being a NDIS participant.

Table 6: Respondent NDIS participation

Respondent	No	Percentage
Yes	51	51%
No	49	49%
Grand total	100	100%

As demonstrated in Table 5, most of the respondents (44%) are currently school students, with a further 45% recently graduating and 11% deciding to leave school early. Again, this is likely explained by the age profile of respondents (i.e. 43% aged 19-25 years in this survey). In contrast, the respondent profile for the 2022 CYDA

survey was on only 25% aged 19-25 years (27). Additionally in the prior survey, 71% were currently a school student (27).

Table 7: Respondent currently at school student

Respondent	No	Percentage
Yes	52	44%
No, I decided to leave school early	13	11%
No, I recently graduated	53	45%
Grand total	118	100%

In terms of the types of schools that respondents attend, as Table 6 demonstrates, 38% attend public mainstream school, with another 22% at non-government mainstream schools. Just 6% of respondents attend special school and 8% are home schooled or undertake distance education. For those who selected other to this question, free text responses explained they undertook other forms of alternative education or independent schools.

Table 8: Respondent type of school attended

Respondent	No	Percentage
Public mainstream school	44	38%
Non-government mainstream school	25	22%
Modified curriculum in mainstream school	10	9%
Home school or distance education	9	8%
Special School	7	6%
Dual enrolment. For example, you attend both a mainstream and special school	3	3%
Other	17	15%
Grand total	115	100%

Within schools, just over three quarters attend regular classes (79%), with smaller numbers in a special unit or were unsure of their class type (Table 9). Of those who selected the other option, respondents attended a mixture of regular and special classes and/or regular classes with support. Some respondents indicated that they also attended gifted and talented classes or personalised education classes (e.g. Big Picture).

Table 9: Respondent type of class attended

Respondent	No	Percentage
Regular class	88	79%
Special unit	11	10%
Not sure	1	1%
Other	12	11%
Grand total	112	100%

Plans, learning supports, and learning materials

Respondents were asked questions about IEPs which may also be referred to informally as a personalised learning plan or support plan. An IEP is a personalised plan created with the school that helps individuals with learning through the development of goals, adjustments and strategies.

As shown in Table 10, most respondents had heard about IEPs (75%). However, only 58% of respondents had ever had an IEP developed. This finding was consistent with the prior survey result that found that 59% of respondents had an IEP in place at the time of survey (noting minor variations in the survey question between the two surveys) (27).

Table 10: Awareness of Individual Education Plans

Respondent	No	Percentage
Yes	78	75%
No	18	17%
Not sure	8	8%
Grand total	104	100%

Respondents were asked whether those who had an IEP were involved in creating it. However, only 39% of respondents had been personally involved in creating their IEP, raising issues as to the degree of responsiveness of these plans to the needs and preferences of students with disability.

Additionally, one respondent stated, *“I had no idea an IEP was a thing until I began my study at university”* (Respondent 2), indicating variability in IEP awareness and involvement across educational stages.

Table 11: Individual Education Plans in place

Respondent	No	Percentage
Yes	60	58%
No	26	25%
Not sure	18	17%
Grand total	104	100%

Respondents involved in their IEP described that the process comprised one to several meetings with parents and staff. These meetings encompassed challenges, goals, and support aims. The formality of these meetings risked being intimidating for some students. One respondent reflects: *“It’s complicated. My teacher asks me to set goals, I don’t have a clue, so the teacher suggests goals and somehow when the plan is sent home it says I developed it, which is really not true is it?”* (Respondent 3).

For some respondents it was described as a collaborative brainstorming process, while for others, it was described as a pre-populated plan presented for acceptance.

Some respondents reflected that it was not always possible to quickly articulate individual goals, with these being particularly hard to describe by younger students, creating a reliance on teachers and school representatives in leading the development process.

Respondents with IEPs were asked whether it was considered helpful in securing the accommodations need by students with disability. As shown in Table 12, only 39% of respondents considered that their IEP was helpful, but for others the plan was central to ensuring needs and preferences were met. With just 39% of respondents actively participating in developing their own plans, concerns arise regarding the extent to which IEPs genuinely reflect the individual needs and preferences of students with disability.

As one respondent explained, the effectiveness of IEPs could improve over time, where: *“In primary school, I was too young to offer any meaningful input. In high school, it was determined that no IEP was necessary; I was comfortable with this because my support needs were being met”* (Respondent 4).

Table 12: Individual Education Plan assistance with access to school-based accommodations

Respondent	No	Percentage
Yes	35	39%
No	10	11%
Unsure	17	19%
Not applicable	28	31%
Grand total	90	100%

The qualitative responses provided valuable insights into the IEP creation process, highlighting both collaborative and less inclusive experiences. For some respondents, IEP development was described positively as a collaborative brainstorming process involving multiple meetings with parents and school staff to identify challenges, set goals, and establish support strategies.

There were age-related differences observed in IEP involvement, with younger students typically having minimal input, often due to difficulty articulating personal goals. Older students, particularly those in higher education, reported greater engagement and autonomy in the process. Given the complexity and pace of some school environments, several respondents described a drift away from accommodations formalised in plans. As one respondent explains that features of the plans were *“typically ‘too difficult’ to implement or against individual classroom ‘policy’”* (Respondent 5).

Some respondents also reported perspectives of other personalised plans in place, including the use of a medical plan (24%) and a behavioural support plan (7%). Overall, the survey suggests low access to and involvement in personalised plans. Respondents describe in free text responses the potential for misalignment between different plans.

Respondents were also asked if they receive specific support at school because of their disability. The survey showed the 72% of respondents received specific

disability supports at schools. While half of respondents were NDIS participants (Table 6), only 5% reported that NDIS funding was provided for school-based supports (Table 13). Some did not receive NDIS funded supports (43%), and others were unsure of whether they received funded supports. Examples of supports funded by the NDIS included teacher aids and facility modifications.

Table 13: NDIS funding for school-based supports

Respondent	No	Percentage
Yes	45	43%
No	5	5%
Don't know	17	16%
Not applicable, I am not an NDIS participant	37	36%
Grand total	104	100%

As such, there is a reliance on school-based supports provided outside of funding available through the NDIS. This is not surprising given that adjustments and supports for education are the responsibility of schools. However, a lack of school understanding of provisions of supports or available funding in schools to provide supports can lead to a reliance on NDIS funding.

Table 14 shows the diverse suite of supports received by respondents, including help with curriculum, for example, changes made to tasks, assessments or materials (27%), additional help from staff (20%), and adjusted attendance where a student's schedule is changed to better suit their needs (13%)

Table 14: Type of supports received

Respondent	No	Percentage
Help with school curriculum	50	27%
Additional help from staff	37	20%
Help from friends or classmates	22	12%
Equipment or technology relating to your disability	23	12%
Assistance with personal care	7	4%
Access to in-school specialists	11	6%
Adjusted attendance	24	13%
Not applicable	11	6%
Not sure	3	2%
Grand total	188	100%

Free text responses described supports received. These included additional time (i.e. for tasks, examinations, and breaks), reconfiguration of desk and class locations to reduce distances and increase accessibility, and access to supports (i.e. aids, scribes, and other technologies).

The survey asked respondents whether they had heard about the Disability Standards for Education prior to the survey. Table 15 illustrates the responses to this question, revealing that just 8% of respondents know a lot about them and 45% have never heard of these. This gap suggests a critical area for improvement,

emphasising the need for increased education and communication about the rights and standards designed to support students with disability.

Table 15: Awareness of the Disability Standards for Education

Respondent	No	Percentage
Yes, I've heard of it and know a lot about it	8	8%
Yes, I've heard of it and know a moderate amount	11	11%
Yes, I've heard of it but don't know much about it	38	37%
No, I've never heard of it	46	45%
Grand total	103	100%

The findings underscore gaps and opportunities in the development and implementation of IEPs and related supports. Key issues include limited student involvement, inconsistent effectiveness of IEPs, and insufficient alignment across various support plans. These findings highlight the urgent need for systemic improvements to ensure meaningful, individualised, and consistently implemented educational supports for students with disability.

Experience of exclusion and bullying

Content warning: The material in this section reports on firsthand experiences of threats and intimidation students with disability have experienced.

Table 17 shows responses to a question about whether respondents had ever been or felt excluded from activities at their school. As this Table demonstrates, of those who responded to this question, 72% had experienced exclusion. These findings are broadly aligned with the prior survey where 70% of respondents reported having experienced exclusion (27). 59 respondents provided detail in free text responses. There were some themes in these responses about the nature of the exclusion that has been experienced or felt by students with disability.

Table 16: Experience of exclusion from school-based events and activities

Respondent	No	Percentage
Yes	70	72%
No	27	28%
Grand total	97	100%

Respondents described challenges with establishing connections with their peers and creating enduring friendships through their school experience. Consequently, respondents reflected on the loneliness and isolation that was attributed to their experience of exclusion within school over time. Respondents with communication difficulties noted particularly limited opportunities for social interaction limiting their opportunity to build social skills and exacerbating their sense of isolation. One respondent poignantly shared, *“I felt very lonely most of the time at school”* (Respondent 6).

The survey reveals students perceiving teachers as unwilling or ill-equipped to emotionally support students with disability experiencing difficulties and mental health issues because of the barriers they faced and that resulted in exclusion. One response described an experience of being sent home from school because they were upset. While the following comment from Respondent 7 reflects that some of these negative feelings were self-imposed instances of students being sent home for displaying distress suggest that school responses were sometimes counterproductive. Furthermore, several respondents expressed an unwarranted sense of self-blame, reflecting internalised stigma due to unmet needs and inadequate support.

“I understand feelings of exclusion may be self-inflicted, not genuinely occurring, rather a thought manifesting. However, when I have felt excluded, it’s mostly as a result of other students.” Respondent 7

A common reason for these issues of exclusion was an emphasis on sports, extracurricular activities, and academic achievement that meant school-based cultures were not designed to fundamentally value the experience and contribution of students with disability. Schools can be competitive environments where some students perceived adjustments and accommodations an unfair advantage or special treatment to benefit of students with disability over others.

Some of the barriers that contributed to exclusion included harms from noise, with failures in noise management resulting in additional stressors and anxiety. There were also other facility and built environmental challenges in accessing spaces used for extracurricular activities. This might include extracurricular clubs being hosted in rooms on a second storey or demountable buildings not easily accessible by those using a wheelchair. These experiences were seen as able to be mitigated through proactive school-based planning for inclusion, but this was not always achieved. Several respondents highlighted a lack of teacher willingness to consult with students with disability to support their inclusion. This may be despite evidence of support from parents and medical professional reports. There is a difference in the understanding and assessment of risks posed to students with disability, with a preference for exclusion.

As one respondent reflects, *“The school was too scared to let me go on a trip because they did not believe that I was capable enough to participate, even with my own and doctor’s reassurances”* (Respondent 8).

The stigma and impact of exclusion was described as constant, not limited to the duration of events such as one-off sports carnivals and camps. Respondents reflected that the influence of their exclusion was felt before, during and after these events. One respondent explains: *“Most of my peers they don’t have basic and correct knowledge about hidden disabilities. They see me as weird, so they refuse me to join for the group work”* (Respondent 9).

These experiences of exclusion were evident across all school settings. Respondents described the pervasiveness of the barriers to inclusion across the whole school experience, regardless of school type. Students with disability reflected on the need to change schools in the hopes to gain a break from the experience of exclusion. Yet in some instances, this break was temporary, if at all.

“I had to change kindergartens because I was excluded. I had to change primary schools because both my sister and I were excluded. I had to change secondary schools because I was excluded. I am picked last for everything. I am rejected from all extracurricular activities like school plays (I want to be an actress so this is really harsh.) Nobody wants to sit with me in class or on the bus. I can’t go on excursions. I basically have felt excluded from everything except actual presence for me entire time in school (I am in Year 12).” Respondent 3

The survey also asked respondents if they had experienced bullying at school. As Table 17 demonstrates, of those who responded to this question, 73% had experienced bullying. This result represents an increase in those who reported this in the prior survey (65%) (27). 57 respondents provided additional free text responses to this question. Some responses were to indicate that respondents had been bullied many times over their schooling, but they did not want to recount specifics of these incidences as that would prove retraumatising.

Table 17: Experience of school-based bullying

Respondent	No	Percentage
Yes	62	73%
No	19	22%

Do not want to answer	4	5%
Grand total	85	100%

Respondents described experiences of bullying from a range of perspectives. Respondents explain that the sources of bullying included peers, teachers, and other school staff. The experience of bullying was considered directly related to an individual's disability but was also exacerbated by other forms of prejudice including racism, homophobia, body shaming, and gender bias. Students of all ages and genders were considered a potential source of bullying; however, respondents highlighted the influence of male bullying. As one respondent explains, teachers and school staff were also seen as contributors to the experience of bullying:

"Students, teachers and general staff telling me I'm faking my disabilities, telling me to get over it, classmates teasing and physically pushing me, harassment and exclusion. Being mocked for needing to sit down or leave the room." Respondent 10

Forms of bullying were varied, including physical aggression, psychological harassment, verbal threats, property damage, and social exclusion. Bullying commonly occurred in unsupervised areas like toilets, locker rooms, and lunch areas, leading respondents to feel vulnerable and unsafe. One respondent described needing constant adult supervision during breaks to avoid bullying:

"I spend all of my recess and lunchtime with a teacher, if there is not one available, I go to reception or sickbay, basically always in sight of an adult so I can't be tortured." Respondent 4

Many respondents emphasised the harms of gossip, nicknames, and being dismissed. These forms of bullying were initiated by individuals and groups in ways that contributed to social exclusion. The competitive focus on sports and academic achievement meant that the performance of students with disability was a constant source of harassment (e.g. assessment results).

Some responses shared reflections on attempts to explain the rationale for being bullied by peers. Respondents grappled with seeking to understand whether they were being bullied because of their disability or more fundamentally because they were simply not likable to others or desirable as a friend.

"People tease me a lot. Maybe because they don't understand my communication style or they just don't like me." Respondent 3

As one respondent explains these forms of bullying stigmatised students with disability with the potential to sabotage new connections with peers or existing friendships:

"Mainly social-based bullying (rolling eyes at me, excluding me from groups, getting others to ignore or exclude me, gossiping or spreading rumours, and damaging reputations and friendships)." Respondent 11

The internet was seen as contributing to bullying with added forms of cyberbullying and online abuse. Respondents described the potential that physical or psychological bullying is recorded on personal devices and posted on the internet. A seemingly permanent record of abuse created through these posts creating recurring damage to one's reputation.

Responses from teachers and school staff were generally reactive rather than proactive, often treating bullying as isolated incidents rather than recognising it as an enduring issue. This reactive stance frequently placed the burden of prevention back onto students with disability, inadvertently penalising victims.

As one respondent explains, the onus on preventing bullying risked responsibility being placed on students with disability to avoid putting themselves in situations conducive to harassment.

"The teacher caught one of my bullies. The next day I was told I could not go back to the oval as that's where the bully played. So, I was punished for being bullied." Respondent 6

Respondents often described bullying as an enduring feature of their school experience.

I have been bullied every year since I began school. Mostly verbally, behind my back or through social isolation. It has never once been handled properly, so the bullying never stopped. Respondent 5

Here we have presented a few of the experiences shared by survey respondents. Responses from this sample of 118 individuals suggests there are a large number of students with disability who regularly experience exclusion and bullying. The survey findings clearly indicate widespread issues of exclusion and bullying among students with disability. These experiences highlight systemic gaps in school inclusivity practices, insufficient emotional and social support from educators, and inadequate structural accommodations. The enduring negative impacts on academic achievement, emotional health, and social integration underscore an urgent need for proactive, comprehensive strategies to foster genuinely inclusive school environments.

Overall experience of schools

The survey included questions asking respondents to describe their experiences at school. Respondents were asked to explore a series of statements that examined overall features and dynamics with the school setting. These statements encompassed notions of support, inclusion, outlook, teacher capabilities, opportunities for peer connections, and the culture in support of students with disability. 31 Respondents provided additional free text responses.

These questions were optional to complete; therefore, the response rates vary across statements as a subset of the overall sample of 118 students with disability. However, the response to these questions were higher than those pertaining to matters of exclusion and bullying, which suggests that these questions were more amenable to completion by some respondents.

Table 18 shows that most respondents (54%) considered their school was supportive of learning and activities. As shown in Table 19, a further 41% experienced being welcomed and included at school. These findings suggest that from the outset, several positive experiences were retained by students with disability. Yet one survey respondent acknowledged that *“Even with all these great things and a great school, school is still hard”* (Respondent 12).

Table 18: Agreement with the statement: *My school supports me to learn and experience activities*

Respondent	No	Percentage
Yes	52	54%
No	29	30%
Unsure	15	16%
Grand total	96	100%

Table 19: Agreement with the statement: *I feel welcome and included at school*

Respondent	No	Percentage
Yes	39	41%
No	37	39%
Unsure	19	20%
Grand total	95	100%

Table 20 shows most respondents reported their teachers were able to engage with them optimistically about the future. Yet one respondent explains that *“some teachers did not talk about the future in a positive way”* (Respondent 13), with a further 27% of respondents sharing this view.

Table 20: Agreement with the statement: *Teachers or other staff speak about the future with me in a positive way*

Respondent	No	Percentage
Yes	58	60%
No	26	27%
Unsure	12	13%
Grand total	96	100%

The suite of statements also revealed that these positive experiences were not able to be sustained. Table 21 shows that nearly half of respondents (49%) considered that it was not apparent to them that teachers and school staff retained the necessary capabilities to sustain supports. As one respondent explains:

“I only feel welcome and included by a select number of staff and students. Only staff that work closely with me have had the knowledge and training needed to support me in the best way.” Respondent 14

Another respondent explains that their teachers did not acknowledge the issues that they face, describing how *“Lots of the teachers were not good. I had one who was incredibly passive aggressive, one who straight up denied my mental health issues”* (Respondent 15). Some respondents also did not feel that these issues would change quickly and that their school did not want to improve how they treated students with disability, *“My school is quite uneducated on disabilities and provisions in general. They don’t seem to want to be educated on them either”* (Respondent 16)

This indicates substantial gaps in staff training regarding disability support, directly affecting students' school experiences. Potentially linked to these findings, Table 22 shows perspectives of the opportunities for involvement were different for students with disability. We find that 36% of respondents considered that their school retained a culture that is supportive of disability. A further 48% did not think this was the case for their school, whilst another 16% were unsure.

Table 21: Agreement with the statement: Teachers and other staff have the knowledge and training to support me in a way that suits me

Respondent	No	Percentage
Yes	34	36%
No	46	49%
Unsure	14	15%
Grand total	94	100%

Table 22: Agreement with the statement: There are opportunities for me to get involved and do the same things as other students

Respondent	No	Percentage
Yes	59	62%
No	25	26%
Unsure	11	12%
Grand total	95	100%

Table 23: Agreement with the statement: My school has a culture that is supportive of disability

Respondent	No	Percentage
Yes	34	36%
No	45	48%
Unsure	15	16%
Grand total	94	100%

Free text responses allowed for further exploration of issues across schools they attended. Respondents reported a high degree variation in experiences between schools, including within mainstream school settings. One respondent described issues with lack of follow up by counsellors and inadequate responses from schoolteachers and principals, while others reported failures in being listened to. This left students with disability feeling “*stuck*”, needing to continually advocate for their experience and their rights (Respondent 14). Concerns were also raised about the role of school leadership in fostering inclusive environments. As one respondent explained, “*Everything was great except for the leadership team and principal*” (Respondent 17).

These comments reveal disparities between stated school policies and actual practices, highlighting the importance of genuine and consistent leadership in promoting inclusive school cultures and sustaining improvements in school capabilities.

Interventions designed to improve the experience for students with disability were perceived as being reactive and ad hoc in nature. One respondent explained that these “*band-aid solutions*” failed to activate a whole-of-school approach that would foster prevention, early identification, and responsiveness to these issues in the future. Specifically:

“I feel as though some of the schools I have attended want to support myself and others with disability, but there is a lack of knowledge on how to deal with a student with a disability. Schools often attempt to implement band-aid solutions, rather than installing procedures to help current and future students and staff with disability.” (Respondent 15)

Students consistently expressed challenges in advocating for themselves and their rights within school systems. As one respondent explains “*I’ve really had to fight for my right to education*” (Respondent 17). Other respondents described having to make themselves aware of their rights so that they were able to advocate for themselves: “*I hated that the only thing that would get me to school (music & performing) was threatened to be removed. I had to learn the hard way about legislation that protects me and developed strong advocacy skills, but I wish I didn’t need to*” (Respondent 18).

These accounts highlight ongoing struggles with having student voices heard and respected within educational settings. This includes practical accommodations for assessment. Respondents highlighted issues around accommodations for exams, with one explaining that they did not know this is something that could be done. “*I missed out on applying for any kind of accommodations for my ATAR exams because I simply did not know they were an option, or that there was a deadline on them*” (Respondent 19). Others were aware of this but chose not to pursue these because of concerns about how they would be perceived, “*There is a stigma around provisions and for that reason I have never used them for exams*” (Respondent 20). Respondents also expressed challenges with curriculum support, particularly as they progressed through school. As one respondent explains, “*Support is great in primary school and early high school but from years 10-12 it disappears almost completely*” (Respondent 21).

While some respondents had been clear about their needs, they found that teachers were sometimes unwilling to make these. As one student describes, *“Teachers often refuse to take my AARA [Access arrangements and reasonable adjustments] into account and don’t understand how my disability impacts me participating. I have also been told late assignments are ‘my fault,’ although my AARA dictates extra time”* (Respondent 5).

Physical accessibility and sensory accommodations were repeatedly considered insufficient. This was in terms of academic study, with one respondent remarking *“I could not go into a classroom for an entire term due to the glue used for the carpet. I had to teach myself the syllabus for an entire subject”* (Respondent 2). This also manifest in terms of social activities. One respondent explains, *“At my previous school, the clubs I would join were often moved to the second story, which I couldn’t get to as it was only accessible by stairs”* (Respondent 5). These insights suggest a need for clearer communication, adherence and reduced stigma surrounding academic accommodations.

Free text responses revealed the potential for loss of trust where expectations of capabilities are not met. While schools may seek to promote their established capabilities and supports for students with disability, one respondent reflects on the distinction between how these positive intentions or aspirations may translate into practices and cultures over time. The respondent explains, *“My school markets itself as supportive of disability, that is why I am there, but it is not true”* (Respondent 2). This comment highlights the importance of an earnest commitment to improvements in the experience of students with disability.

There was also indication from respondents that the choice to pursue online learning, distance education, or homeschooling often emerged as a response to challenges experienced within traditional school environments. For some, such as one respondent enrolled in a distance learning program, the decision to shift from a mainstream setting was deeply appreciated, highlighting distance education as *“so much more understanding than physical mainstream school”* (Respondent 22). Similarly, another respondent attending a virtual program describes it as transformative, remarking that this move in Year 9 was *“probably the thing that saved my life”* (Respondent 23). This program offered a supportive environment that allowed them to manage severe depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation, ultimately providing the space needed to recognise their autism. These narratives clearly illustrate that alternative education settings such as online learning, distance education, and homeschooling can be critical lifelines, offering more inclusive, flexible, and supportive environments tailored to students’ unique academic and emotional needs.

These responses all point to the importance of school-based leadership and a coordinated approach to system improvements to deliver on a commitment for an improved experience for students with disabilities. The findings illuminate deep-rooted complexities in students’ school experiences, including gaps in teacher understanding, insufficient accommodations, inadequate mental health support, social isolation, challenges in self-advocacy, and pervasive misunderstandings about disabilities. Insights underscore an urgent call for comprehensive, systemic reforms

to genuinely support inclusive education and address the nuanced needs of students with disability.

Leaving school early

Respondents provided various insights into why some students with disability left school prematurely. Many of these reasons for leaving correspond to the negative experiences reported above. These narratives reveal that critical systemic and personal challenges can have profound consequences for a child and young person's life trajectory.

Several students reported leaving school early due to issues of inaccessibility and discrimination. As one respondent describes, *"Not enrolled in tertiary education, currently enrolled in TAFE. Left mainstream education (year 8, had multiple attempts at re-engaging up until year 10) due to being placed in residential care facilities long-term, and the lack of support to continue my education whilst being in"* (Respondent 7).

In some cases, children and young people had to go without education because it proved too difficult to access this. As one respondent describes, *"Public school couldn't accommodate me and alternative education was too hard to access"* (Respondent 24). Others described falling between gaps in systems where schools were not accessible, but the level of their needs would not allow for them to access specialist education. *"The school I was at could 'no longer accommodate my needs'. I don't qualify for special schools and no alternative school in my area had room or could 'accommodate my needs"* (Respondent 21). These accounts underscore structural barriers preventing students from maintaining consistent educational pathways.

Another reason respondents gave for leaving school early was insufficient academic and personal support, which led to overwhelming stress and burnout: *"The lack of support I received got too much for me to stay"* (Respondent 25). Some respondents explained that a lack of appropriate supports meant that they felt like they could not achieve. As one respondent describes, *"I struggled a lot in school and received no support due to my parents not believing in getting me diagnosed. I would struggle a lot in tests and assignments, and my marks would be really poor and then some teachers would make me feel really stupid"* (Respondent 26). Such experiences illustrate critical gaps in recognizing and supporting diverse learning needs, leading to disengagement and early departure.

As reported above, many respondents reported experiencing bullying, and this was also cited as a factor in some students leaving school early. As one describes, *"Bullying harassment all through my school years from reception to year 11, Nanna said enough is enough"* (Respondent 27). These narratives underscore the severe impact of sustained bullying on students' mental health and educational persistence. Health-related reasons, including chronic illness and safety concerns, also led to early school exits. As one respondent explains *"I left school early because the school would not make safety accommodations to prevent me bringing COVID home to my medically disabled family. Although I am technically enrolled as a homeschooler*

now, I am studying university and TAFE courses" (Respondent 28). A number of other respondents also indicated that they had left school early because they had experienced health challenges. These examples highlight the necessity for flexible and health-informed accommodations within school policies.

Negative interactions with educators also influenced decisions to leave school. For example, one respondent explains that "*Some teachers would make me feel really stupid and I left as I didn't need an HSC for the career I'm pursuing*" (Respondent 26). These accounts reveal the critical role of teacher-student interactions in student engagement and retention.

The experiences described by respondents illustrate diverse and often overlapping reasons for leaving school prematurely, emphasising the urgent need for systemic reforms. Enhanced support systems, better health accommodations, anti-bullying initiatives, improved teacher training, and increased accessibility are essential to creating environments where students with disability can thrive academically and socially, enabling them to complete their education successfully.

What do these findings mean?



As outlined in the background, this is the second time that CYDA has offered a survey on educational experience that is specifically targeted towards students. Although the sample size for the survey is relatively small, this is a significant contribution given that there is somewhat of a gap within the current research evidence relating to the specific experiences of students with disability in the education system. The survey was designed to be similar in nature to those that CYDA has previously conducted with parents to explore whether disabled students experience the same types of challenges as caregivers report.

The following three sections synthesise key themes identified in the survey findings and integrate current research literature to provide a robust and comprehensive understanding of the experiences of students with disability. The first section addresses IEPs, highlighting the need for meaningful student involvement, teacher training, and systemic supports. The second section explores issues of exclusion and bullying, emphasising the critical importance of inclusive school cultures and effective intervention strategies. Finally, the third section discusses students' overall school experiences, examining broader systemic issues such as accessibility, curriculum accommodations, teacher preparedness, self-advocacy, and reasons for early school leaving. Together, these discussions provide evidence-based insights and recommendations aimed at improving educational environments and outcomes for students with disability.

Plans, learning supports, and learning materials

This study highlights important areas for improvement in developing and implementing IEPs for students with disability in Australian schools. The survey results showed considerable differences in how well students understand and participate in creating their own IEPs. Although around 75% of students knew about IEPs, only slightly more than half (58%) had an IEP developed for them. Even fewer students (39%) felt they were actively involved in creating their plans, indicating a need for greater student participation. Recent research confirms this gap, showing many IEPs fail to incorporate proven strategies effectively, affecting students' educational outcomes (28).

Students shared a range of experiences regarding IEP creation. Some described positive, collaborative meetings where their ideas and needs were genuinely heard. However, others reported less inclusive experiences, with teachers or staff deciding goals without meaningful student input. One student explained that teachers often set goals for them, limiting true student participation. The literature consistently supports collaborative processes, highlighting that meaningful student and family involvement leads to better tailored and more effective educational supports (29, 30). Effectiveness of IEPs varied with just 39% of students finding their plans genuinely helpful in getting necessary accommodations. Experts recommend IEPs should have clear, achievable goals tailored specifically to each student's unique needs (30, 31). Modern technological tools, such as online platforms and telehealth solutions, could help streamline IEP creation and implementation, making the process easier for students and educators (32, 33).

Students also pointed out problems with different types of support plans not aligning effectively, causing confusion and gaps in support. Many students rely heavily on supports provided directly by schools, with only a small percentage (5%) receiving additional support through the NDIS. This reliance highlights broader challenges around equitable funding and resource distribution, an issue noted by Whitburn as crucial for effectively supporting students with disability (34).

Teacher training is another critical area needing improvement. Many students reported teachers often lack understanding of disability and effective IEP implementation strategies. Professional development for teachers is essential, enabling them to provide better support and implement inclusive educational practices effectively (35, 36). Research by Walker et al. emphasises the importance of aligning teacher training with inclusive educational practices to ensure educators are well-prepared (37).

Awareness of the Disability Standards for Education was low among students, with nearly half unaware of these important guidelines. Increasing student and family awareness about their rights and available supports is critical for empowering effective advocacy within educational settings (29, 38).

Combining human support with innovative technological resources, such as AI-based tutoring systems, has shown promising results in improving learning and motivation among students with disability (39). Leveraging technology and building strong relationships between educators, students, and families hold potential for enhancing IEP effectiveness. Recent advancements in technology, such as digital platforms and telehealth services, can help streamline communication, provide timely updates, and foster continuous collaboration among all parties involved (32, 33). These tools make the IEP process more interactive and responsive, enabling educators to quickly adapt plans to students' evolving needs. Additionally, promoting strong relationships between students, educators, and families creates a supportive environment where meaningful conversations about students' goals and progress occur regularly, ensuring that each student's unique strengths and challenges are accurately reflected and addressed in their IEP (29, 30). Finally, regular review and feedback are essential to ensure IEPs remain relevant and effective. Incorporating systematic feedback can help educators adjust their strategies to meet changing student needs effectively (40).

Overall, the findings clearly indicate that enhancing IEPs involves improving student involvement, better teacher training, utilising modern technology, promoting inclusive school cultures, and ensuring effective and ongoing evaluation. Addressing these areas will improve educational outcomes for students with disability, ensuring they receive the tailored support necessary for their success.

Exclusion and bullying

The survey highlights ongoing challenges related to exclusion and bullying experienced by students with disability. These findings align with recent research indicating that students with disability are more likely to face various forms of bullying

compared to their peers, including verbal, physical, social, and online bullying (41, 42). Student responses clearly indicate the emotional impact of these experiences, with feelings of loneliness, isolation, and ongoing distress being common themes. Research consistently shows that bullying directed toward students with disability often specifically targets their disability, amplifying its harmful emotional impact. The findings demonstrate students often feel misunderstood or unfairly labelled, emphasising the importance of raising awareness and understanding of disability among both peers and school staff.

Another concern identified in the findings is the inadequacy of school responses to incidents of bullying. Students frequently reported ineffective or inappropriate responses from school staff, which often exacerbated their sense of exclusion and isolation. These findings are consistent with research that indicates ineffective responses by schools contribute to heightened anxiety and absenteeism among affected students (43, 44).

Survey responses also emphasise the serious mental health consequences associated with persistent bullying and exclusion, including increased risks for anxiety, depression, and other psychological issues (45, 46). These impacts underline the need for effective mental health supports within school settings. The practice of gatekeeping, where students with disability face informal exclusion from activities due to perceived risks or assumptions about their capabilities, is evident in the findings. This reinforces systemic barriers, significantly contributing to ongoing inequalities in educational and social opportunities (41).

Additionally, bullying experiences often intersect with other factors such as gender, sexuality, and race, making some students even more vulnerable (47). This complexity underscores the importance of comprehensive and inclusive approaches to bullying prevention and response.

Effective strategies outlined in the research include whole-school approaches involving social-emotional learning and targeted social skills training, which help create inclusive and supportive school environments (48, 49). Students who experience positive school environments emphasised the beneficial impact of these comprehensive strategies, suggesting their potential to reduce bullying and exclusion.

In summary, the findings from this survey highlight an urgent need for systemic changes to address exclusion and bullying faced by students with disability. Recommended actions include adopting inclusive school practices, providing comprehensive educator training, and developing effective reporting and response systems to address bullying promptly and effectively. Such comprehensive and proactive measures are essential to creating safer, more inclusive educational environments for all students.

Overall school experiences and early school leaving for students with disability

The survey findings revealed mixed experiences among students with disability regarding their overall school experiences. Although a slight majority reported feeling supported and included within their schools, significant numbers of students experienced ongoing challenges related to teacher understanding, inadequate accommodations, and negative school cultures. Research consistently emphasises the importance of inclusive education environments, indicating that meaningful support and positive school climates improve both academic and social outcomes for students with disability (37, 50).

A critical issue identified is the variable level of teacher preparedness and training. Nearly half of the respondents felt that teachers lacked the necessary knowledge and training to support them effectively. This aligns closely with research from King et al., who underline the importance of professional development in equipping teachers to meet the diverse needs of students effectively (35). The literature emphasises ongoing, tailored teacher training as essential for ensuring educational supports remain relevant and impactful (36).

Respondents described issues related to school leadership, reflecting critical discrepancies between stated policies and actual practices. Effective leadership is widely recognised as crucial for creating genuinely inclusive school environments, where school leaders actively promote inclusive values and practices across all levels (50). When leadership fails to genuinely foster inclusivity, students frequently report feeling unsupported and marginalised.

Issues surrounding curriculum and assessment accommodations were also prominent in the survey responses. Students reported barriers related to the stigma around accommodations, lack of awareness regarding available supports, and the implementation of adjustments during key assessment periods. Research underscores that accessible curricula tailored to diverse needs and flexible assessment arrangements are essential in creating equitable educational opportunities (40, 51).

Physical and sensory accessibility emerged as substantial concerns, particularly in relation to extracurricular activities and classroom environments. Literature supports these findings, highlighting the need for thoughtful environmental modifications and proactive inclusive planning to ensure equitable participation (37).

Self-advocacy was seen as a challenge for students, who often felt compelled to advocate strongly for basic rights and supports. This experience of ongoing advocacy burden aligns with findings from Dickinson et al., highlighting the critical role of empowering students and families to advocate effectively while also ensuring systemic accountability for inclusivity (32).

The choice of alternative education pathways, such as online learning or homeschooling, often arose directly from negative experiences within mainstream education settings. Students found these alternatives provided the necessary flexibility and understanding that traditional schools lacked, consistent with findings from Dickinson et al., who identified alternative educational pathways as vital in supporting students during times of crisis or when mainstream settings prove unsuitable (32).

Early school leaving was frequently linked to structural barriers, including inaccessible school environments, insufficient support systems, chronic bullying, and negative interactions with teachers. These factors disrupted educational trajectories, reinforcing the importance of proactive interventions and support systems as highlighted in the literature (40, 41).

In summary, the findings underscore the urgent need for comprehensive, system-wide reforms to support students with disability effectively. Essential actions include enhancing teacher training, ensuring proactive leadership in fostering inclusive cultures, implementing tailored curricula and assessment accommodations, and empowering students through robust advocacy support. Addressing these multifaceted issues will enhance educational outcomes and ensure meaningful inclusion for all students with disability.

Recommendations from the voices of students with disability

Based on the findings of this survey and the research literature, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance educational experiences and outcomes for students with disability in Australian schools:

1. Foster inclusive school cultures

- Schools must implement comprehensive, whole-school anti-bullying programs explicitly addressing disability-related bullying, with clear, consistent, and proactive responses (41, 49).
- Encourage and facilitate regular school-wide activities that promote disability awareness and celebrate diversity to foster genuine inclusion and reduce stigma (50).

2. Improve teacher and staff training

- Invest in mandatory, ongoing professional development for teachers and school staff on inclusive education practices, understanding diverse disabilities, and implementing meaningful accommodations (35, 36).
- Provide targeted training on emotional and psychological support for students experiencing exclusion, bullying, or mental health challenges (32, 44).

3. Strengthen Individual Education Plans

- Ensure IEP development processes are genuinely collaborative, consistently involving students and their families in meaningful decision-making, reflecting students' voices and lived experiences (28, 29).
- Implement regular reviews of IEP effectiveness and adjustments to ensure accommodations remain relevant and are effectively implemented, leveraging

technology to facilitate efficient and transparent communication among stakeholders (32, 33).

4. Enhance accessibility and accommodations

- Proactively address physical, sensory, and curriculum accessibility in school infrastructure planning and policy development to enable full participation of all students (37, 51).
- Increase awareness and reduce stigma surrounding academic accommodations, ensuring all students and families clearly understand available supports and processes for accessing them (40).

5. Support effective school leadership

- Equip school leaders with specific training in inclusive educational leadership, emphasising proactive roles in creating genuinely supportive school environments and ensuring consistent adherence to inclusive policies and practices (50).
- Regularly assess and hold school leadership accountable for fostering inclusive cultures and effectively implementing support frameworks for students with disability.

6. Prioritise mental health and wellbeing

- Integrate comprehensive mental health supports within school settings, including professional counselling and clear referral pathways, to proactively address mental health needs related to bullying, exclusion, and academic pressures (43, 45).
- Establish peer support programs and mentorship initiatives designed specifically to assist students with disability in developing social connections and resilience.

7. Support self-advocacy and student empowerment

- Provide structured programs to educate students with disability on their educational rights, including understanding disability standards and available supports(32).
- Establish clear, accessible channels for students to voice concerns, report discrimination or bullying, and participate actively in school decision-making processes.

8. Expand and support alternative education pathways

- Recognise and resource alternative education options such as online learning, distance education, and homeschooling, ensuring they are inclusive, well-supported, and flexible to meet diverse student needs (32).

- Provide clear information and streamlined processes for students and families exploring or transitioning to these pathways, ensuring continuity and quality of education.

By implementing these recommendations, Australian schools can enhance their capacity to provide genuinely inclusive, supportive, and empowering educational experiences for students with disability.

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