Submission to the Senate Committee

Australian Education Bill 2012

Office of the Chief Executive
Novita Children's Services

W novita.org.au

Further Information

Further information regarding this documentation can be obtained from the Office of the Chief Executive, Novita Children's Services - 171 Days Rd, Regency Park, South Australia, 5010

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Novita Children's Services (Novita) congratulates the Australian Government for embarking upon this important reform supporting the achievement of each child's best potential so as to enable them to participate in a dynamic and globalized world.

The opportunity to provide feedback to the 'Better Schools: A National Plan for School Improvement: Australian Education Bill 2012' is appreciated.

This submission outlines 4 key recommendations which it is hoped will result in the refining of the Bill to ensure optimal outcomes for all children, including those with additional needs.

Recommendation 1

The Australian Education Bill 2012 commits the nation to giving every child access to excellent education.

Through the National Plan for School Improvement 'every child' encapsulates children from low socio-economic backgrounds, Indigenous students, students with disability and students with limited English language skills. The Bill's expression of commitment to excellent education for every child irrespective of socio-economic level of advantage/disadvantage, and level of ability/disability is applauded.

According to the Plan, schools supporting children with these profiles of additional need will attract extra funding above the benchmark funding for every child.

Recognition of the spectrum of costs associated with supporting the best educational, ability and life outcomes for children in these categories is commended.

Novita recommends that in order to determine appropriate funding loadings for the categories of children with special need, that in addition to consulting with the education sector, the government would benefit from the extensive experience and collective knowledge of leading children's disability service providers such as Novita and peak bodies such as Ability First Australia; Children with a Disability Australia; and National Disability Services (NDS) to inform the accuracy of these processes.

Recommendation 2

The principle of the use of Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) including loadings where appropriate for schools assisting children with additional needs is supported.

Novita also supports, in principle, the concept of a four-tiered model of loadings or 'adjustments' including extensive, substantial, supplementary loading adjustments depending on the extent of additional needs of each child. However, Novita emphasises the weight of evidence in education, child development and child health literature in relation to the benefits of early intervention in achieving best developmental and educational outcomes. Thus, periods of 'extensive adjustments' to support early intervention at the right time, right intensity and the right place; provided by professionals relevant to the child's physical, cognitive, sensory, social/emotional challenges or in relation to associated challenges of singular or multiple disadvantage; is recommended. The ability for a child's designated level of loading or 'adjustment category' must be able to be readily adjusted in a timely manner according to changing child and family circumstances, in the new funding model system.

The determination of a child's needs must be informed by the input of the *entire team around the child*:

- the child
- their family/carer
- their teachers
- experts in relation to determining:
    - the extent of a child's challenges as they impact on the ability to access school and the curriculum, the potential of the child to achieve their maximal potential in the areas of physical, cognitive, sensory, social/emotional skills and educational outcomes, and
    - the provision of supports and intervention strategies needed to optimise support for each child to reaching their best possible skills in all educational and life domains.

Recommendation 3

The Bill outlines two targets:

- By 2025, Australian students will be in the top 5 in the world in reading, science and maths.
- All Australian children will go to school in a nation which is ranked in the top 5 for a high quality and high-equity education.

Novita endorses these ambitious targets. Novita draws to the Senate's attention the notion of high-equity education and current systemic challenges that must be addressed by the new funding model for children with a disability. The Australian Education and Development Index Report 2009 highlights:
"Prevalence of Australian children ...at school entry is considerably higher than has been previously reported in the literature and far outweighs the four percent of children that currently qualify for special education services at a school…findings

reveal that less severe developmental problems are not being diagnosed prior to school entry. This is problematic given that these conditions are often more amenable to early intervention." (AEDI, 2009)[1]

Thus, Novita recommends that loading categories for children with what may be described as skill levels requiring less support to access the curriculum, than children with more complex conditions/disabilities must have access to loadings of 'substantial' or 'extensive' adjustments in order to maximise the outcomes of early intervention, thereby reducing the need for the scale of future loadings for that child later in their school years.

Recommendation 4

The Bill describes five core directions that are needed in order to make sure that schools and student achievement keep improving:

Core direction 1: Quality teaching

Novita recommends that the definition of 'quality teaching' addresses the following:

a) Quality teaching for a child who has special needs including disabilities requires that:
   - Teacher and ancillary staff are trained in:
     - the needs of students with a variety of disabilities and/or other special needs, and
     - teaching and learning strategies relevant to the diverse needs of this vulnerable group.
   - Each teacher has sufficient time and resources to ensure that each student with special needs is:
     - included
     - in an environment where lessons are adapted as required, and
     - supported to meet his or her educational goals.
   - Each teacher has access to specialist information from disability/cultural experts regarding the individual student's needs eg cognitive, communication, visual, auditory, behaviour, mobility, and classroom task performance.
   - Each teacher has access to practical advice from disability experts.

b) The building of an ever-improving teacher workforce requires collaboration with the tertiary education sector to ensure that the principles and ethos of quality inclusive teaching practices are embedded in the skill development phases of student teachers.

[1] Children with additional health and developmental needs in Australia
Australian Early Development Index (AEDI)
Supplementary Analysis to the 2009 National Report

Core direction 2: Quality learning
Novita recommends that the definition of ‘quality learning’ addresses the following:

Quality learning for a child who has special needs requires that:

- All the quality teaching goals referenced above are met.
- The student can physically access the entire school environment.
- The child’s ability to engage is optimised by application of assistive technologies, by appropriate positioning within the classroom, curriculum modification, and use of human supports.
- The student’s social and emotional needs are understood and met.
- The student’s abilities are promoted to the greatest level via intervention strategies relevant to the child’s individual plan; learning challenges; academic, developmental and vocational aspirations. This includes the teamed effort of school teachers partnering with families, parents and carers, as well as health professional and other experts to realise the best possible abilities in all life domains for and with the child.

Core direction 3: Empowered school leadership
Novita recommends that the definition of ‘empowered school leadership’ embraces the following:

- Empowered and quality school leadership must embrace the needs of every student, including those with a disability, and other special needs; school leadership needs to value the contribution that these children make to the school community, and their future contributions to society. Attitudinal development towards an ethos of positive inclusion needs to be a feature of ‘empowered school leadership’. The engendering of a culture of inclusivity that see opportunities created by supporting a child/children with additional needs’ education, rather than barriers; and the promoting of creative approaches to problem solving, need to be driven by the leaders of each school as well as the sector as a whole.
- School leaders need to advocate for the needs of all students and promote the expectation amongst all school staff that all students are able to achieve and improve their abilities and educational attainments irrespective of their circumstances, special needs or disabilities. This encapsulates the full spectrum of children, from gifted to those with ‘mild’ or ‘less complex’ learning challenges/developmental disabilities, to those with the most complex or ‘severe’ physical / intellectual / behavioural / social impairments.
- School leaders need to embrace the responsibility for immediacy of action to emerging or changing student needs profile in order to maximise outcomes of early intervention strategies.

Core direction 4: Better information about school performance

Novita recommends that the definition of better information about school performance be expanded to include the following:

- Inclusion of information relevant to students who need extra support in publications and on the My School website.
- Documentation of number and type of partnerships with specialist services, such as disability service providers, that can support the educational outcomes of students who need extra support.
- Inclusion of positive stories of success.

Core direction 5: Meeting student need

Novita recommends that the definition of 'meeting student need' addresses the following:

- For students who need an array of extra supports, it is essential that each individual's needs are clearly and fully identified.
- 'Meeting the need' must extend beyond providing physical access to the school for a child with a mobility issue, but encompasses supporting each child to achieve their best potential.
- A student's needs are only met when they are meaningfully engaged and included in the day to day life of the school and when they have the realistic opportunity of achieving their personal educational goals.
- For some students it will require a partnership approach that goes beyond the classroom, the school or the education sector, but must be inclusive of a collaborative approach with professionals from other sectors including Health, Disability, Housing and Transport.
- Specialist knowledge of the individual student's disability, social or emotional situation may be required to accurately define the student's needs, and then to implement strategies to meet those needs.
- The loadings in addition to benchmark SRS must be readily able to be amended according to evolving individual student needs, and prior to and during key transition phases during their journey through school. The phase of preparation for leaving school, including vocational training for adolescent children with additional needs is highlighted as a key phase in which a school's allocated funding for a child with additional needs must have an additional loading.
- Loadings for children with additional needs, living in regional, rural and remote areas should be inclusive of the dual components of additional funding in recognition of the:
    - location of school in the regional/rural/remote area, and
    - additional costs to the school of securing specialist assistance for children with disabilities and/or other special needs, by virtue of their location, and paucity of disability experts in regional, rural and remote areas.

Novita appreciates the opportunity to provide comment and improvement suggestions to this new, needs-based funding model. The six year implementation plan will allow for positive synergies to be created with other significant reforms such as the National Disability Insurance scheme, thereby supporting every child to achieve their best potential.

ABOUT NOVITA CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Novita Children's Services is a South Australian, non-government, non-profit organisation established in 1939 as the Crippled Children's Association of South Australia, to care for children diagnosed with polio.

Today, Novita is a nationally recognised leader in the research, development and provision of quality services to children and young people living with disabilities, acquired brain injury and other special needs, and their families. Novita currently provides therapy, equipment and family support services to more than 2,000 children – and through broader work with families and communities, has a direct impact on more than 10,000 South Australians. Novita's services include Early Childhood Services, School-aged Services, Country Outreach Services, Inclusion Support and Out of School Hours Care Programs. Services are delivered by teams that include staff from the professions of occupational therapy, physiotherapy, psychology, speech pathology, orthotics, education professionals and family support; provided at home, kindergarten, child care or at school by expert staff based in offices across Adelaide.

Novita also prescribes and makes recommendations regarding specialized equipment such as wheelchairs, walking frames and communication devices to help children to move, speak, play and really 'connect with their worlds'. Novita provides services in partnership with children, their families and the community, and has well-established relationships with Government, non-Government agencies and the private sector, especially the education sector, in delivering services to children, adolescents and their families.

Specific to the South Australian school sector, Novita therapists provide:

- Oral Eating and Drinking Care Plans, Transfer and Positioning Care Plans and the Continence Care Plans for children who are required by the relevant school sector to have a care plan to allow school entry.
- Assessments, prescriptions and staff and student training related to the provision of specialised equipment that is required to allow a student to function effectively in the school and classroom environment. This includes anything from alternative access systems for computers and communication technology to toilet chairs and school chairs.
- Assessment of the school environment from a physical access perspective for an individual student and the provision of recommendations regarding physical modification required to overcome access issues.
- Assessment, treatment/therapy and programming with related teacher training in areas of student need including behaviour, cognition, communication, classroom task performance, social skills and mobility.

Disability service provision agencies such as Novita Children's Services in South Australia have a long history of providing this specialist input to education planning processes as well as providing ongoing therapeutic input to support the student's ability to access the curriculum.