

# Specialist school eligibility review

## Report summary

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## Overview

This summary provides an overview of the specialist school eligibility review. It outlines the findings, recommendations and the Victorian Government response.

## Background

In Victoria, specialist schools play an important role in providing school options for students with disability. Specialist schools cater for students with specific types of disability and high needs. There are 4 types of Victorian government specialist schools. They are:

- schools for students with intellectual disability
- schools for autistic students
- schools for students with physical disability
- deaf schools and deaf facilities for deaf and hard of hearing students.

All students have the right to attend their designated neighbourhood school (known as their local school). Most Victorian students with disability and high needs attend inclusive local schools. Families also have the choice to seek to enrol their child in a Victorian government specialist school. Enrolment in specialist schools is subject to specific eligibility and enrolment criteria, and the availability of places at the school.

## Purpose

As part of the Victorian Government's election commitment, through the Fighting for Students with Disability and their Families initiative, the Department of Education (department) commissioned a review. The review focused on the eligibility processes for Victorian government specialist schools. The goal was to help more families choose the right school for their child's needs.

The review sought to understand whether specialist school eligibility criteria and processes are practical and based on best practice. It also explored opportunities to improve issues. It looked into:

- current diagnostic thresholds (or cut-offs)
- how user-friendly the eligibility process is
- barriers for students enrolling in their chosen schools.

## How the review was undertaken

Ernst & Young carried out the review. It included a literature review, seeing how things work in other states and countries, and stakeholder consultations. An advisory group guided the process. It was made up of people with disability, clinicians, principals and department representatives. The review was completed in October 2024.

## Review findings

The review revealed that the current eligibility process helps schools to provide targeted programs. Yet, many parents and carers find the process complex and stressful. They believe there is a lack of clear information about enrolment. A more complete understanding of educational needs is necessary to guide enrolment decisions.

Specifically, the eligibility determination and enrolment processes:

- lack clear information and communication
- can be complex, confusing, time-consuming, and stressful for parents and carers
- do not always provide a complete view of a child's educational needs.

The review also found gaps in eligibility and enrolment data. Data collection varies within the department. There are also issues with oversight of data within the department.

The review identified 11 key findings. They show what parents, carers, and students are concerned about in specialist school enrolments. They relate to information, eligibility criteria, processes, and data collection. Read the key findings in Table 1.

*Table 1. Key findings of the review*

Theme	Key Finding
<b>Communication and information</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. It is difficult for parents/carers to access high-quality information about school options for their children with disability and high needs.</li></ol>
<b>Eligibility Criteria</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>2. The current criteria for all specialist schools focus on diagnostic based information rather than a holistic evaluation of a child's educational needs, making it difficult to appropriately enrol a small number of students with complex needs.</li></ol>
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>3. Non-standard enrolments allow students' functional needs to be considered where they do not meet (diagnostic-based) eligibility criteria. But the non-standard enrolment process can be applied inconsistently, and it can be confusing and burdensome.</li></ol>

Theme	Key Finding
	<p>4. The eligibility criteria for schools for students with intellectual disability use specific score cut-offs, which risk excluding students who would benefit from specialist education support.</p> <p>5. The eligibility criteria for autism schools require evidence from a multidisciplinary diagnostic assessment, which can place significant burden on parents/carers.</p> <p>6. Eligibility criteria for schools for students with physical disability are often interpreted as requiring evidence from paediatricians, which is difficult to obtain.</p> <p>7. The eligibility criteria for deaf schools and facilities are based on evidence from an audiogram, which provides limited information about educational needs.</p> <p>8. Eligibility criteria, such as specific cut-offs on diagnostic assessment scores, can vary between schools of the same type, causing confusion and risking inequitable enrolment outcomes for students.</p>
<b>Eligibility Processes</b>	<p>9. The process of determining eligibility can be complex, confusing, time-intensive, expensive and stressful for parents/carers.</p>
<b>Data Collection</b>	<p>10. The potential for eligibility reviews to result in a student's enrolment being revoked often causes stress for students and parents/carers.</p> <p>11. Data collection relating to specialist schools is relatively fragmented, limiting visibility of important aspects of the system.</p>

## Review recommendations

The review made 11 recommendations to improve the specialist school enrolment system. These are listed in Table 2.

The recommendations aim to improve family experiences and better inform families about their choices when enrolling in specialist schools. The recommendations will also strengthen the department's ability to manage enrolments.

The recommendations are grouped into 4 main themes:

- Improve access to information about school options for students with disability and high needs.
- Update eligibility criteria to reflect best practice and focus on students' holistic needs.
- Streamline enrolment processes and make them consistent across all specialist schools.
- Enhance data collection to improve monitoring of eligibility and enrolment decisions.

*Table 2. Review recommendations*

Theme	Recommendation
<b>Improve Access to Information</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Improve access to quality information about school options for students with disability.</li></ol>
<b>Update Eligibility Criteria</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>2. Retain the use of eligibility criteria for enrolment in specialist schools.</li><li>3. Retain the use of diagnostic eligibility criteria for enrolment in specialist schools, while updating and improving them.</li><li>4. Develop a decision-making framework to guide consideration of functional needs for students found ineligible according to diagnostic criteria.</li><li>5. Use a diagnosis of intellectual disability (ID) as the threshold for eligibility for schools for students with ID, rather than specific score cut-offs.</li><li>6. Align the diagnostic eligibility criteria for schools for autistic students with contemporary clinical guidelines (which includes considering expanding the department-contracted assessment service to</li></ol>

Theme	Recommendation
	<p>support some or all types of assessments required to establish eligibility in autism schools).</p>
	<p>7. Clarify the types of professionals that can submit evidence for applications to schools for students with physical disability.</p>
	<p>8. Ensure consistent eligibility criteria are used by all schools of the same type as appropriate.</p>
<b>Update Processes</b>	<p>9. Define and apply a standardised approach to enrolling students in specialist schools.</p>
	<p>10. Adjust the eligibility review process to focus on identifying the educational setting that is best placed to support each student.</p>
<b>Improve Data Collection</b>	<p>11. Improve the collection of data relating to specialist school enrolment.</p>

## Government response to recommendations

The Victorian Government accepts all recommendations. The department plans to implement them by the end of 2027. Read more about this in Table 3.

These changes will make it easier for families and schools to identify the best education setting for the child's needs. The changes will help to make the eligibility process for specialist schools clearer. This will make it simpler for families and schools.

*Table 3. Review recommendations*

Theme and recommendation	Government response	Implementation plan
<b>Theme 1: Improve Access to Information</b>		
Rec 1. Improve access to quality information about school options for students with disability	Accept	The department website will be updated to make it easier to find clear information about school options for students with disability, including specialist schools, eligibility and how to enrol.
<b>Theme 2: Update Eligibility Criteria</b>		

<b>Theme and recommendation</b>	<b>Government response</b>	<b>Implementation plan</b>
Rec. 2. Retain the use of eligibility criteria for enrolment in specialist schools.	Accept	The department will keep eligibility criteria for specialist schools so they can identify the students whose learning and wellbeing can be supported.
Rec. 3. Retain the use of diagnostic eligibility criteria for enrolment in specialist schools, while updating and improving them.	Accept	The department will keep diagnostic eligibility criteria. The review found that they provide clarity, consistency and are an effective way to identify students who would be well-supported by the different specialist school types.
Rec. 4. Develop a decision-making framework to guide consideration of functional needs for students found ineligible according to diagnostic criteria.	Accept	The department will improve the non-standard enrolment policy guidance to support schools to make specialist school enrolment decisions when diagnostic eligibility criteria are not met.
Rec. 5. Use a diagnosis of intellectual disability (ID) as the threshold for eligibility for schools for students with ID, rather than specific score cut-offs.	Accept	The department will develop criteria that use an ID diagnosis as the eligibility threshold for schools for students with ID. This will mean that the needs of students with an ID are considered more fully.
Rec. 6. Align the diagnostic eligibility criteria for schools for autistic students with contemporary clinical guidelines (which includes considering expanding the department-contracted assessment service to support some or all types of assessments required to establish eligibility in autism schools).	Accept	Using current funding, the department will work with expert clinicians to update the eligibility criteria for schools for autistic students, so that it matches with how autism is diagnosed today.
Rec. 7. Clarify the types of professionals that can submit evidence for applications to schools for students with physical disability.	Accept	The department will update the enrolment guidance for physical disability schools to clarify the types of professionals that can submit supporting evidence.
Rec. 8. Ensure consistent eligibility criteria are used by all schools of the same type as appropriate.	Accept	The department will keep supporting consistent eligibility criteria among specialist schools, by encouraging them to use the enrolment policy template.

### Theme 3: Update Processes

<b>Theme and recommendation</b>	<b>Government response</b>	<b>Implementation plan</b>
Rec. 9. Define and apply a standardised approach to enrolling students in specialist schools.	Accept	<p>The department will create and apply a standard way to enrol students in specialist schools, so the process is clear, fair and consistent.</p> <p>Work will also start on exploring the option of making the timing of enrolment intakes the same across specialist schools, similar to the Year 6 to 7 and Foundation enrolment timelines. This will help schools plan ahead.</p>
Rec. 10. Adjust the eligibility review process to focus on identifying the educational setting that is best placed to support each student.	Accept	<p>The department will revise the approach to eligibility reviews, so that students won't have to leave a specialist school based on their IQ score alone, if that school is the best place for their learning needs.</p>
<b>Theme 4: Improve Data Collection</b>		
Rec. 11. Improve the collection of data relating to specialist school enrolment.	Accept	<p>The department will improve how specialist school enrolment data is collected. This will allow the department to keep track of non-standard enrolments and better understand patterns for planning and improvement.</p>

## Contact for further information

For queries or feedback about the review, please email [disability.inclusion@education.vic.gov.au](mailto:disability.inclusion@education.vic.gov.au).

For more information about the supports available to schools, please see [www.education.vic.gov.au/parents/additional-needs/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/parents/additional-needs/Pages/default.aspx)