

The background of the slide is a photograph of a classroom. In the foreground, a young boy with brown hair is seen from the side, wearing a grey sweater and a hearing aid on his left ear. He is looking towards the right. In the background, a teacher and other students are visible, though they are out of focus. A yellow rectangular box is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing the title and date.

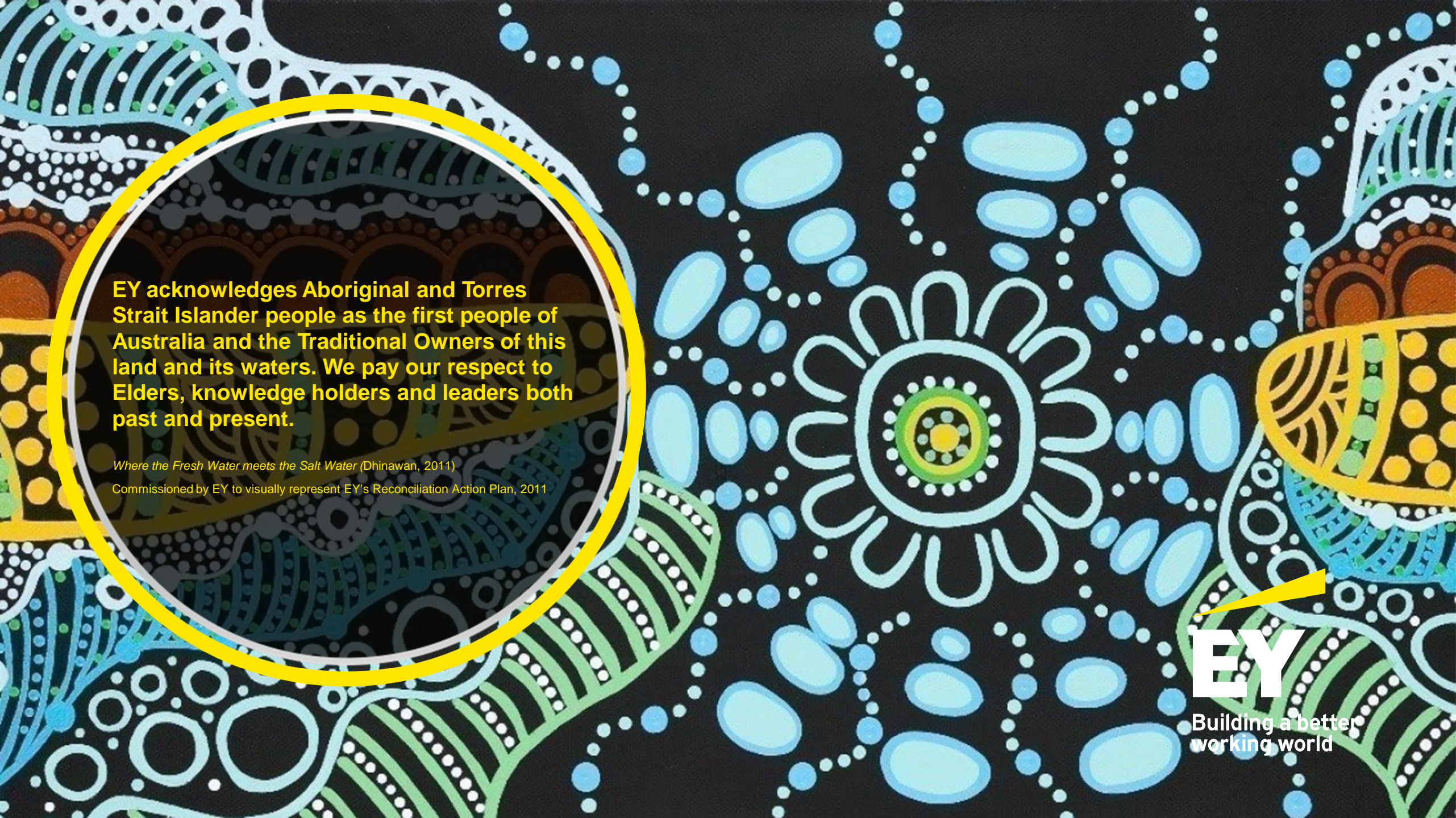
Specialist School Eligibility Review

Final Report

November 2024

Ernst & Young (EY) has prepared this report for the Department of Education in the State of Victoria (the Department) and, in doing so, has acted in accordance with the Department's instructions and has prepared this report only for the benefit of the Department.

You should read this report in its entirety including any disclaimers and attachments. A reference to the Report includes any part of this report. No further work has been undertaken by EY since the date of this report to update it.



EY acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the first people of Australia and the Traditional Owners of this land and its waters. We pay our respect to Elders, knowledge holders and leaders both past and present.

Where the Fresh Water meets the Salt Water (Dhinawan, 2011)

Commissioned by EY to visually represent EY's Reconciliation Action Plan, 2011

EY

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Glossary of terms

School types

- **Autism school** – A type of specialist school designed for students who are autistic
- **Deaf facility** – Deaf facilities are located in local government schools and employ a specialist teacher of the deaf for students who are deaf or hard of hearing. There may be regular classes with extra support, and small group or individual support sessions with a specialist teacher of the deaf or support staff
- **Deaf school** – A type of specialist school designed for Deaf and Hearing Impaired students
- **Dual/multi-mode school** – A type of specialist school designed for students with mild to profound intellectual disability (IQ of 70 and below)
- **Mainstream school** – A local school otherwise known as a designated neighbourhood government primary or secondary school
- **Physical disability school** – Specialist school for students with physical disability
- **Special school** – A type of specialist school designed for students with mild intellectual disability (IQ below 70 but above 50 or 55, depending on the school's enrolment criteria)
- **Special developmental schools** – School for students with moderate to profound intellectual disability (this is usually defined in practice as an IQ below 50 or 55)
- **Specialist school** – Umbrella term for all Victorian government schools specialising in education for students with disability
- **Specialist setting** – Refers to education settings available for students with specific disability and high needs. These settings include specialist schools, specialist campuses and supported inclusion schools
- **Supported inclusion schools** – Government primary and secondary schools that support the learning needs of all students, including students eligible to attend a specialist school (usually for students with intellectual disability, and identified to have an IQ of 70 and below). These schools can have specialised facilities and tailored supports for students with disability

General Terms

- **Carer** – An individual who provide personal care, support and assistance to another individual in need of support due to disability, medical condition, including terminal or chronic illness, mental illness or is frail and aged
- **DI** – Disability Inclusion
- **DRC** – Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability
- **Eligibility criteria** – For the purpose of this review, this refers to the criteria outlined by the Program for Students with Disabilities. If one of the criteria categories is fulfilled and aligns to a specialist school type a student is eligible for that school type
- **Enrolment criteria** – Criteria for entry into a Specialist School. Enrolment criteria are established centrally for all Specialist School types; in addition, individual schools may establish local criteria
- **FSIQ** – Full scale intelligence quotient
- **Functional needs** – The needs of a student relevant to their education, including the support that they require. These are distinct from medical conditions or disability, but can be influenced by them.
- **People/person/child/student with Disability** - Anyone considered to 'have' or 'live with' Disability
- **PSD** – Program for Students with Disabilities
- **ED SWED** – Executive Directors of Student Wellbeing and Engagement

Executive Summary

EY was commissioned to review the eligibility criteria for specialist schools

Background and Context

In August 2023, the Department of Education (department) commissioned Ernst and Young (EY) to undertake a review of the eligibility criteria and processes for specialist schools.

This review was commissioned following the Victorian government's commitment to review the eligibility processes for Victorian government specialist schools so that more parents/carers could choose the school that best suits their child's needs.

Implementation considerations and contextual factors, including specialist school infrastructure provision and capacity constraints, Disability Inclusion reforms and the findings of both the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (Disability Royal Commission) and the Independent Review of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS Review), were considered as part of the review.

The Role of Specialist Schools

The specialist school system plays an important role in providing school options for students with disability. Specialist schools are designed to cater for students with specific disabilities (e.g. deafness or hardness of hearing, autism, physical disabilities), as well as mild or moderate-to-profound intellectual disabilities (e.g. special and special development schools).

While the majority of students with disability and high needs attend inclusive mainstream schools, Victoria has also established a specialist education system consisting of settings dedicated to meeting the needs of students with specific types of disability. Approximately two per cent (13,942 students) of students enrolled in Victorian government schools attend a specialist school or setting.

The legal right to attend a mainstream school does not apply to a specialist school (unless it is a supported inclusion school that is also a student's designated neighbourhood school). The Minister can delegate powers to specify entry criteria for a particular school and in accordance with this provision entry criteria have been established for all government specialist schools.

The department supports the choice of students with disability and their parents/carers to attend a specialist school or setting, where the student meets the eligibility criteria and where there is sufficient accommodation for the student at that school.


The Methodology

The review methodology included a detailed assessment of available data and policies in relation to Victoria's specialist school system, extensive consultation and a jurisdictional and literature scan, which included consultation with ten Australian and international jurisdictions. This helped form a perspective on eligibility criteria and enrolment processes.

- ▶ The jurisdictional scan found that approaches to specialist school eligibility vary across Australian and international jurisdictions.
- ▶ In addition, insights from the literature review were relevant in relation to diagnostic assessments, school transition experience for students with disability and high needs and the balance between centralised consistency with local autonomy in relation to decision making on eligibility and enrolments.
- ▶ The review has been guided by an expert advisory group, which included members with lived experience, specialist school principals, allied health clinicians and department representatives.
- ▶ Over 200 stakeholders were consulted to understand the specialist school eligibility criteria and enrolment processes, how these support the experiences of students and parents/carers, and areas for improvement.
- ▶ Analysis led to the identification of 33 challenges, which informed the development of key findings and recommendations to adjust eligibility criteria and enrolment processes.

Composition and capacity snapshot of Victorian specialist schools

Victoria's specialist school environment consists of schools dedicated to meeting the needs of students with specific types of disability and high needs, with the majority of students with disability and high needs attending inclusive mainstream schools. Specialist school types are determined by the eligibility criteria (see Appendix 1: The Victorian current state section for further detail).



Victorian Specialist Schools (2023):

82 government specialist schools in Victoria.

2% of all students enrolled in Victorian government schools attended a specialist school or setting in 2023 (**13,942 students**). This proportion has remained relatively stable over the last five years. Approximately 43% of students with disability who receive student-level funding are currently enrolled in a specialist school or setting.

Victorian specialist schools are comprised of:


- 67** schools for students with intellectual disability.
- 3** schools for the deaf .
- 9** autism schools.
- 4** schools for students with physical disability (%).

With additional specialist provision within inclusive mainstream schools (approx. 355 students).

- 10** supported inclusion schools**.
- 19** deaf facilities.

** 1 school is counted in both the autism schools and the schools for students with intellectual disability

** Supported inclusion schools (SIS) are government primary and secondary schools that support more students with disability than typical schools



Specialist School Indicative Capacity Assessment:

9.75% of specialist schools (8/82) are at or above 100% of their indicative capacity.

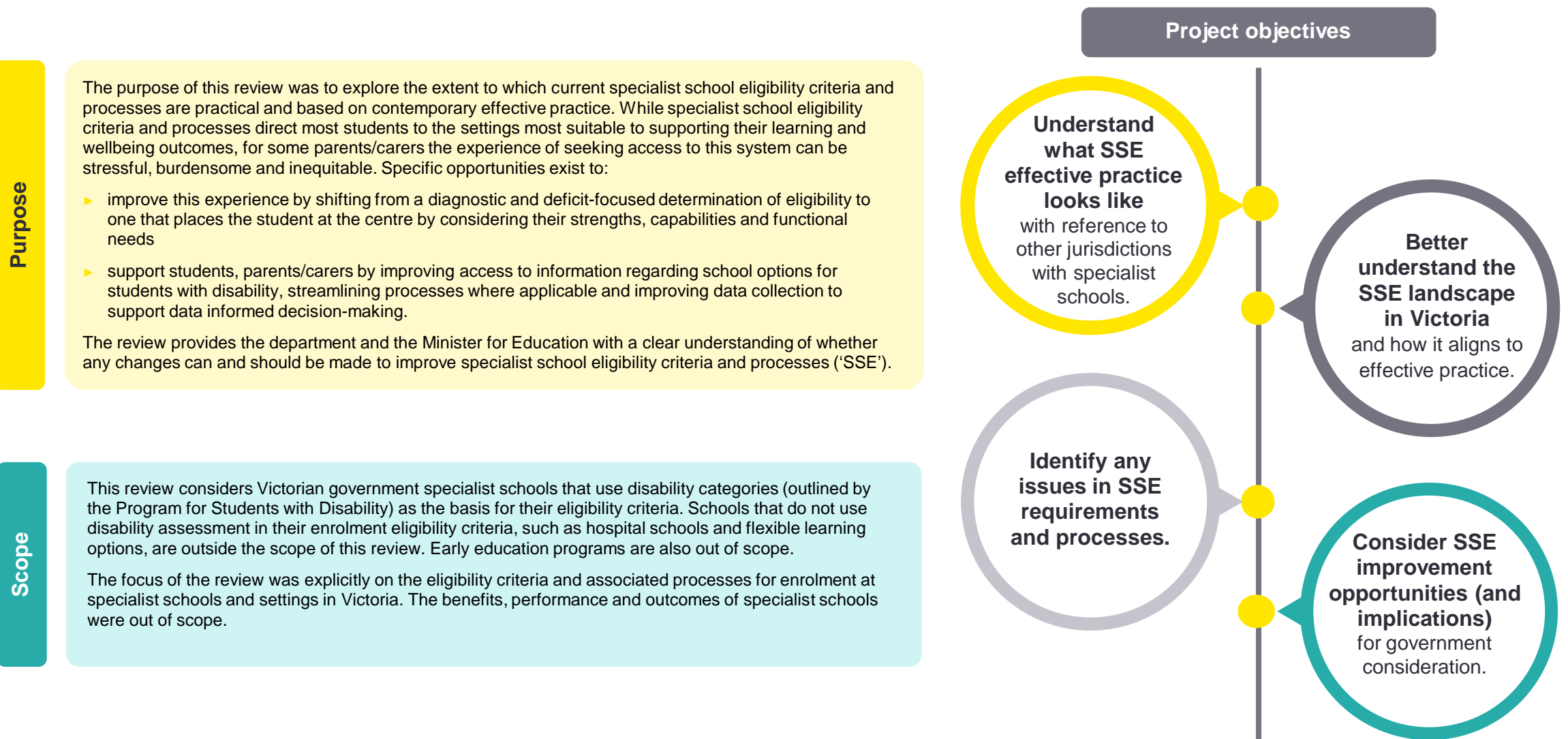
30% of specialist schools (25/82) have enrolment levels above 90% of their indicative capacity. A majority of these are in metropolitan Melbourne (72%, relative to the total proportion of all specialist schools in metro Melbourne, 67%).

These schools are spread across 8 metropolitan areas, encompassing growth areas as well as established areas that are not necessarily considered growth corridors.

72% of specialist schools with enrolment levels above 90% (18/25) are intellectual disability (ID) schools and 24% (6/25) are autism schools – noting this represents a relatively low proportion of all ID schools (18/69) but a high proportion of all autism schools (6/9).

67% of all autism schools (6/9) have enrolment levels above 90% (6/25). Further, all 6 autism schools consulted reported they had a waiting list or equivalent.

This review was guided by a clear purpose and scope



The policy context surrounding the review has been changing during the life of this project

The disability sector has been the subject of two important reviews over recent years. The Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (Disability Royal Commission) was first announced on 4 April 2019, and established to create a vision for a more inclusive Australian society where people with disability are independent and live free from violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation. More recently, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) Review considered the design, operation and sustainability of services and supports available to people with disability.

Disability Royal Commission

All Disability Royal Commission Commissioners supported:

- ▶ major reforms to overcome the barriers to safe, equal and inclusive education in mainstream schools
- ▶ more students with disability in mainstream schools, with half of the Commissioners recommending specialist schools be phased out (recommendation 7.14) and half recommending they be retained for a small proportion of students with disability and high needs (recommendation 7.15).

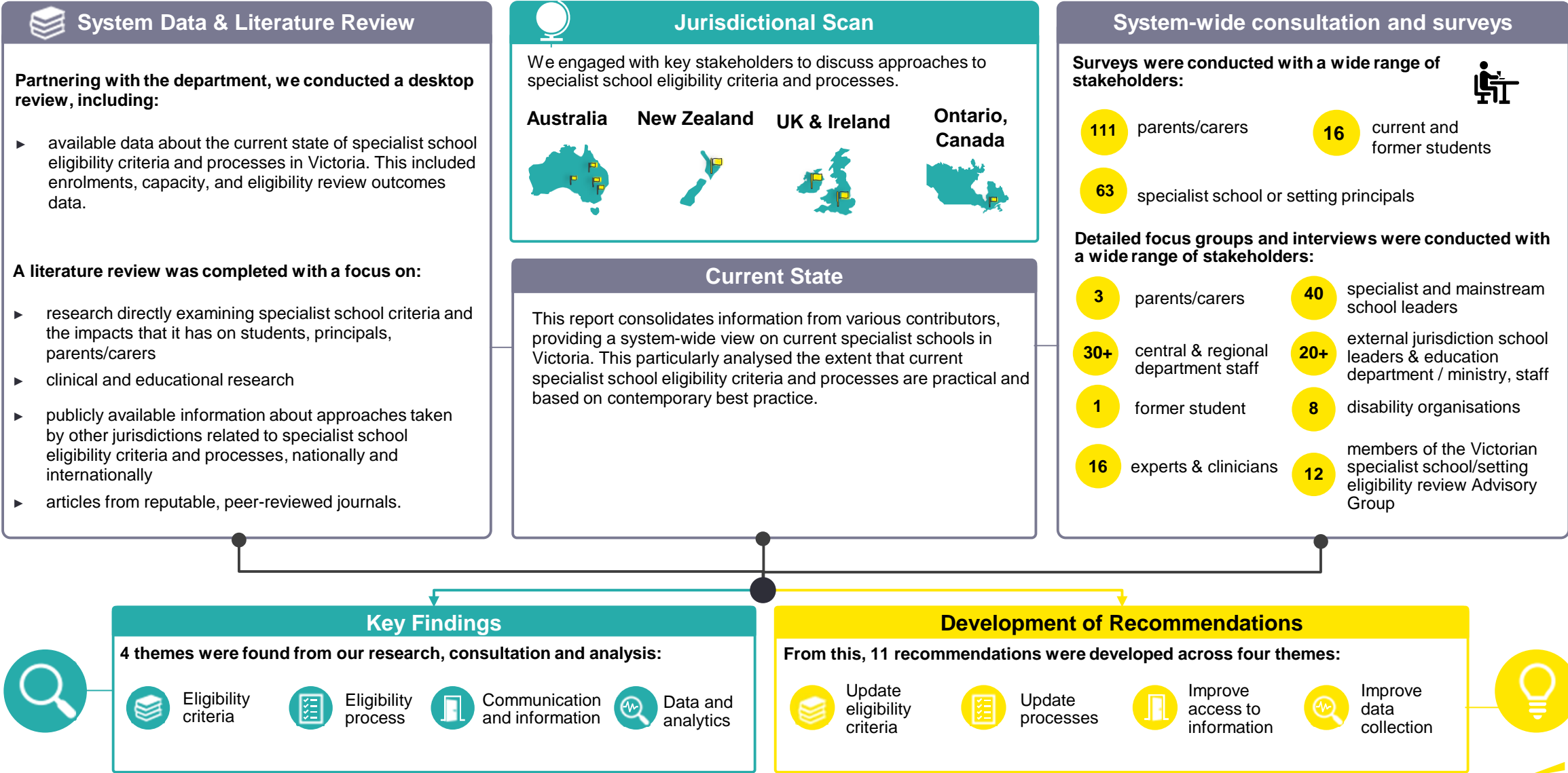
EY understands that:

- ▶ the Victorian government welcomes the Disability Royal Commission's findings and has carefully considered the models put forward to support parent/carer choice and ensure that all students can benefit from a quality education, regardless of where they go to school. The Victorian government has confirmed that it will not close specialist schools. Victoria values the role specialist schools play in the education system and will continue to provide parents and carers with the choice of enrolling their child in a school that is right for them – whether that is an inclusive local school or a specialist school (where eligibility is met and where there is sufficient accommodation). Victoria recognises that inclusion does not mean a 'one size fits all' approach to education
- ▶ recommendations enclosed in this report do not respond to the Disability Royal Commission's recommendations. This report notes where there is alignment with relevant Disability Royal Commission findings and recommendations relevant to the scope of this work. Recommendations presented in this report are designed to improve the experience of students, parents/carers and system stakeholders in the current system, whereby specialist school options are available to students where it is appropriate.

NDIS Review

The NDIS Review has had a specific focus on the operation of the scheme, market and potential future policy directions. The NDIS Review highlights a broad disability sector context. Of relevance to this report, we have taken into consideration the NDIS Review's recommendations on eligibility criteria and processes to access disability support services and resources.

Findings and recommendations were developed from system-wide consultation, data analysis and an international literature and system scan



Our recommendations were developed to address key areas for improvement



Findings

The review identified four key areas for improvement:

Eligibility Criteria

- ▶ Current eligibility criteria are largely diagnostic in nature.
- ▶ While this assists in identifying students whose needs align to the programs offered by particular school types, it cannot provide a holistic understanding of students' educational needs.
- ▶ Diagnostic criteria are not necessarily aligned to contemporary clinical practice.



Eligibility Processes

- ▶ Processes for determining eligibility can be complex, confusing, time-intensive, expensive and stressful for some parents/carers.
- ▶ Reviews of eligibility often cause stress for students, parents/carers.



Communication and Information

- ▶ It is difficult for parents/carers to access high-quality information about school options for their children with disability and high needs.



Data Collection

- ▶ Data collection is relatively fragmented, which limits visibility over important aspects of the specialist school system.



Recommendations

These findings have informed the development of recommendations across four themes:

Update Eligibility Criteria

- ▶ Retain eligibility criteria but update these to incorporate an assessment of functional needs and align diagnostic elements to contemporary practice.

Update Processes

- ▶ Define and apply a standardised approach to enrolling students.
- ▶ Adjust the eligibility review process to focus on identifying the best educational setting for each student.

Improve Access To Information

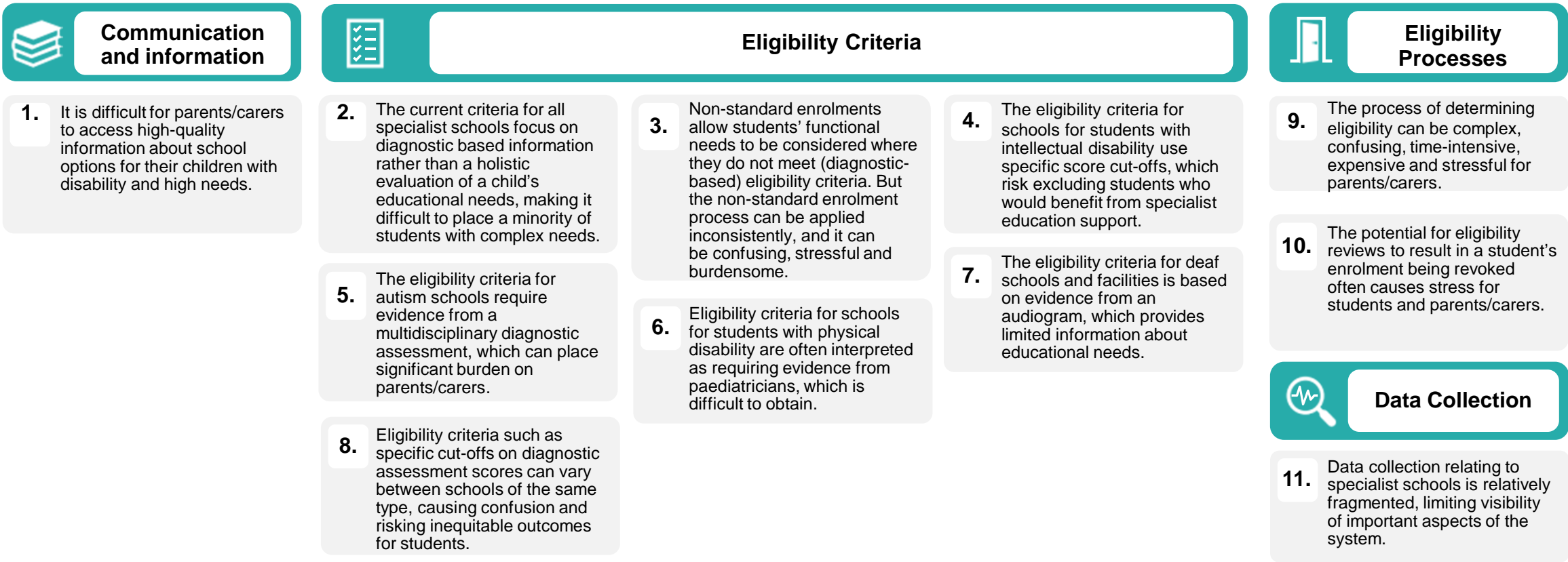
- ▶ Improve the accessibility of quality information about school options for students with disability.

Improve Data Collection

- ▶ Improve the collection of data relating to specialist school enrolment.

The review identified eleven key findings that encapsulate the areas for improvement

Following the consultation, data analysis and jurisdictional and literature review, the following key findings were developed to support improvements to the current eligibility criteria and assessment process. These findings represent the most significant findings or areas of concern impacting parents, carers and students in the specialist school system.



Eleven recommendations have been developed to increase choice, improve family experiences and department capability to administer the system

Detailed recommendations, including risk and implementation considerations, have been developed to support changes to the specialist school enrolment system that will improve choice, the experience of parents, carers and students, the efficiency of the system's operations, and the gathering and use of data to inform future policy reform.

Recommendations

Improve Access to Information

1.

Improve access to quality information about school options for students with disability

Update Eligibility Criteria

2.

Retain the use of eligibility criteria for enrolment in specialist schools.

4.

Develop a decision-making framework to guide consideration of functional needs for students found ineligible according to diagnostically-focused criteria.

6.

Align the diagnostic elements of eligibility criteria for autism schools to contemporary clinical guidelines.

8.

Ensure consistent eligibility criteria are used by all schools of the same type as appropriate.

Update Processes

3.

Retain the use of diagnostically-focused eligibility criteria for enrolment in specialist schools, while updating and improving them.

5.

Use a diagnosis of intellectual disability as the threshold for eligibility to schools for students with intellectual disability, rather than specific score cut-offs.

7.

Clarify the types of professionals that can submit evidence for applications to schools for students with physical disability.

9.

Define and apply a standardised approach to enrolling students in specialist schools.

10.

Adjust the eligibility review process to focus on identifying the educational setting that is best-placed to support each student.

Improve Data Collection

11.

Improve the collection of data relating to specialist school enrolment.

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Prioritisation of recommendation implementation will be critical to a sustainable and considered change process

The implementation of the recommendations will be subject to resourcing and prioritising. The matrix below outlines which recommendations could be prioritised for implementation to build momentum and confidence in the system.

Recommendations

1

Improve the accessibility of quality information about school options for students with disability.

2

Retain the use of eligibility criteria for enrolment in specialist schools.

3

Retain the use of diagnostically-focused eligibility criteria for enrolment in specialist schools, while updating and improving them.

4

Develop a decision-making framework to guide consideration of functional needs for students found ineligible according to diagnostically-focused criteria.

5

Use a diagnosis of intellectual disability as the threshold for eligibility to schools for students with intellectual disability, rather than specific score cut-offs.

6

Align the diagnostic elements of eligibility criteria for autism schools to contemporary clinical guidelines.

7

Clarify the types of professionals from whom evidence can be submitted for applications to schools for students with physical disability.

8

Ensure consistent eligibility criteria are used by all schools of the same type as appropriate.

9

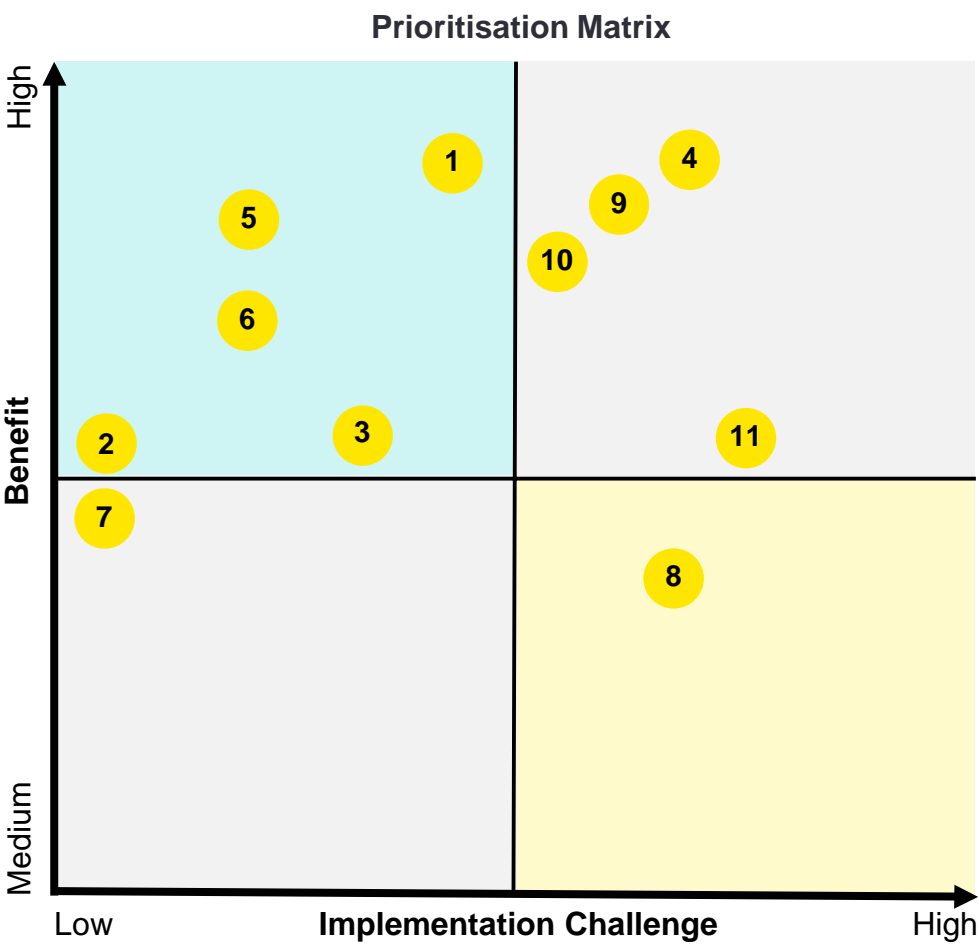
Define a standardised approach to enrolling students and ensure it is applied by all specialist schools.

10

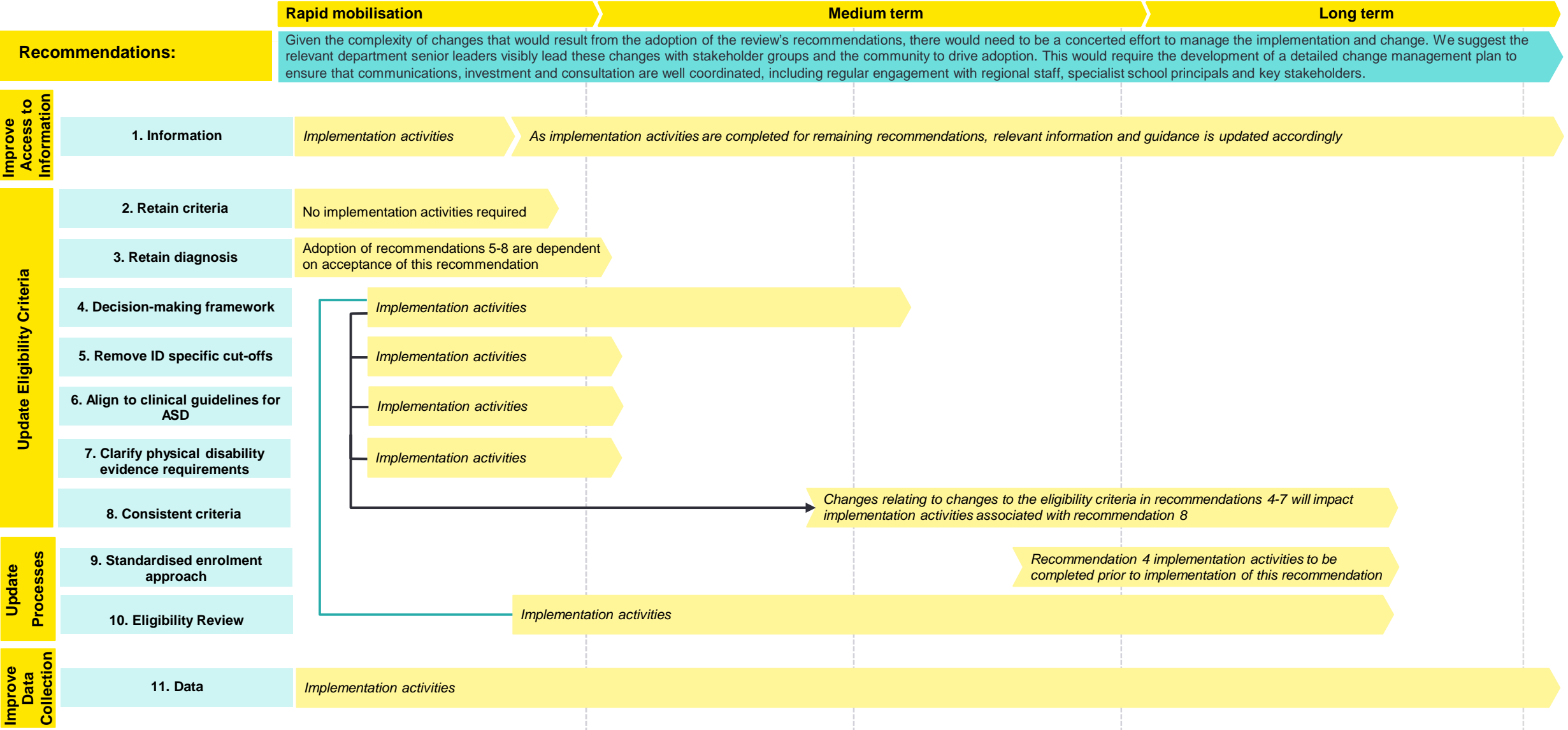
Adjust the eligibility review process to focus on identifying the educational setting that is best-placed to support each student.

11

Improve the collection of data relating to specialist school enrolment.



Pathway to implementation of 11 recommendations



1 Victoria Current State

Legislative and policy overview for students with disability in Victoria, including the right for students with disability to attend their local mainstream school

The legal right of students with disability to attend their local school

Under the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* (Vic) (ETRA), a child of compulsory school age is entitled to be enrolled at his or her designated local government school (otherwise known as their 'local school' or 'mainstream school')¹. A child of compulsory school age may be enrolled at a government school other than their designated neighbourhood school if there is sufficient accommodation for the child at that school².

The *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (Cth) (DDA) provides that it is unlawful for an educational authority to discriminate against a person on the ground of the person's disability³. This includes discrimination in the form of:

- ▶ refusing or failing to accept the person's application for admission as a student
- ▶ applying discriminatory terms on the person's admission as a student
- ▶ denying or limiting the student's access to any benefit provided by the educational authority
- ▶ expelling the student
- ▶ subjecting them to any other detriment
- ▶ developing curricula or training courses having content that will either exclude the person from participation or subject them to any other detriment (or accrediting such curricula or training courses).

The DDA requires schools to make 'reasonable adjustments' to accommodate students with disability⁴.

¹ ETRA s2.2.13(1).

² ETRA s2.2.14

³ DDA s22

⁴ As the failure to make reasonable adjustments is likely to constitute direct or indirect disability discrimination under sections 5 and 6 of the DDA.

⁵ ETRA s2.2.1(1) and (2)

⁶ ETRA s2.2.13(2)(a)

⁷ ETRA s2.2.16(b)

Education for students with disability in Victoria

Victoria strives towards an education system that is inclusive and allows all students, including those with disability and high needs, to be supported in their local mainstream school. The Victorian government expects all schools to make reasonable adjustments and provide high-quality education to students with disabilities, in accordance with their legislative obligations and Victoria's commitment to inclusive education. This is outlined in the department's Students with Disability policy.*

ETRA provides the Minister for Education with powers to establish government schools and determine the types of schools within the system.⁵ While the majority of students with disability and high needs attend inclusive mainstream school (approx. 57%), Victoria also has an established specialist education ecosystem consisting of government schools and settings dedicated to meeting the needs of students with specific types of disability. Approximately 2% of students enrolled in Victorian government schools attend a specialist school or setting.

The legal right to attend a designated local government school does not apply to a specialist school or other school with the purpose of enrolling students with disability and high needs⁶. The Minister is able to delegate powers to specify entry criteria for a particular school⁷ and in accordance with this provision entry criteria have been established for all government specialist schools and settings.

The department supports the choice of students with disability and their parents/carers to attend a specialist school or setting, where the child meets the eligibility criteria and where there is sufficient accommodation for the child at that school.

Specialist schools and settings have a limited number of places and there is no legally-enshrined requirement for the specialist education system to expand its capacity in response to student demand. When planning for new schools for students with disability, the department considers forecast student demand (primarily derived from Victoria in Future population projections) and specialist education accessibility in conjunction with enrolment pressure at existing specialist settings.

For mainstream schools, the Education and Training Reform Act 2006 guarantees a child's right to be enrolled at their designated neighbourhood government school, regardless of capacity. All designated neighbourhood government schools have a school zone. Specialist schools do not have zones as they are not designated neighbourhood government schools under the Education and Training Reform Act 2006. The department reviews school zones annually and zones may be adjusted to reflect new schools opening, changing provision at existing schools (e.g., relocating a campus or changing year levels offered), improving school accessibility, or managing enrolment demand.

* <https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/students-disability/policy>

A small proportion of students currently attend specialist schools in Victoria, which cater to students that fall into distinct disability 'categories' and have high needs

Victoria's specialist school environment consists of schools dedicated to meeting the needs of students with specific types of disability and high needs and caters to a small proportion of all students attending Victorian government schools. Specialist school types are determined by the eligibility criteria, outlined in more detail in this section.

2%

of all students enrolled in Victorian government schools, attended a specialist school or setting in 2023 **(13,942 students)**. This proportion has remained relatively stable over the last five years.

43%

of students who receive Program for Students with Disability or Disability Inclusion student level funding are currently enrolled in a specialist school or setting.



84

Government specialist schools in Victoria

These are comprised of:

69

schools for students with intellectual disability.

3

schools for the deaf.

9

schools for autistic students.

4

schools for students with physical disability.

With additional specialist provision within inclusive mainstream schools:

12

supported inclusion schools.

16

deaf facilities.

Deaf facilities are located in mainstream schools and employ a specialist teacher of the deaf for students who are deaf or hard of hearing. There may be regular classes with extra support, and small group or individual support sessions with a specialist teacher of the deaf or support staff.

Types of schools for students with intellectual disability:

- ▶ **Dual/multi-mode Schools** – for students with mild to profound intellectual disability (IQ of 70 and below)
- ▶ **Special Schools** – for students with mild intellectual disability (IQ between 50 and 70)
- ▶ **Special Developmental Schools** – for students with moderate to profound intellectual disability (IQ below 50)
- ▶ **Supported Inclusion Schools** – are government primary and secondary schools that support the learning needs of all students, including students eligible to attend a specialist school (usually for students with intellectual disability, and identified to have an IQ of 70 and below). These schools can have specialised facilities and tailored supports for students with disability

Of the 84 specialist schools, 25 are facing enrolment pressures with many of these spread across metropolitan Melbourne

The specialist school system in Victoria inherently has limited capacity, as the system is not designed to cater for a universal right of entry, but to accommodate only those students with the highest need (approximately 2% of students). Accordingly, there are currently mechanisms in place for the department to manage demand for specialist schools (such as enrolment caps and the priority order of placement policy), noting the complexity associated with understanding demand for specialist school provision. Data limitations mean that the capacity of specialist schools can only be indicatively assessed. Based on assessment of these data, there appears to be enrolment pressure primarily at schools in metropolitan Melbourne, including autism schools. Additionally, anecdotal data suggests some enrolment pressure in regional areas.

Indicative Capacity Assessment:

9.5%

of specialist schools (8/84) are at or above 100% of their indicative capacity*.

30%

of specialist schools (25/84) have enrolment levels above 90% of their indicative capacity. A disproportionate majority of these are in metropolitan Melbourne (72% relative to the total proportion of all specialist schools in metro Melbourne, 67%)*.

These schools are spread across 8 metropolitan areas, encompassing growth areas as well as established areas that are not necessarily considered growth corridors.

72%

of specialist schools with enrolment levels above 90% (18/25) are Intellectual Disability schools and 24% (6/25) are autism schools – noting this represents a relatively low proportion of all ID schools (18/69) but a high proportion of all autism schools (6/9).

67%

of all autism Schools (6/9) have enrolment levels above 90% (6/25). Further, all 6 autism schools consulted** reported they had a waiting list or equivalent.

See Appendix 1: Victoria Current State for detailed capacity data for specialist schools with enrolments above 80% of their capacity for 2023

Schools in Rural Areas

Principals of regional and rural schools for students with ID widely reported enrolment pressure at their schools. However, this was generally not borne out in the data, other than in clusters in the Goulburn and Wimmera South-West Areas.

Mechanisms for managing demand

Unlike mainstream schools, specialist schools are not required to expand their capacity to meet demand from eligible students (although the department does increase the capacity of specialist schools based on provision planning analysis where practical and justified by forecast population growth).

There are currently mechanisms in place for the department to manage demand for specialist schools, in addition to enrolment criteria and enrolment caps. A priority order of placement policy exists to govern how enrolment applications are managed where demand exceeds (or is likely to exceed) a school's capacity. However, stakeholder consultation indicated limited awareness of this policy and the department currently does not have oversight of how or whether it is implemented by individual specialist schools.

*Note: SIS capacity figures are not included as the nature of their enrolments means that the available data cannot provide an accurate indication of their enrolment pressure. Furthermore, these figures are based on available enrolment and capacity data; four specialist schools' capacity data was not available for analysis.
** There are 9 autism schools in Victoria; this report received input from 6 autism schools regarding the presence of a waitlist.

The current eligibility criteria are based on diagnostic assessments of student disability type

Current eligibility criteria for specialist schools are informed by disability categories used for the Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD), the legacy student-level funding model for students with disability and high needs. The Minister for Education has established state-wide eligibility criteria for each type of government specialist school, aligned to the PSD based disability categories as outlined below. See Appendix 1 for further detail on eligibility criteria, evidence and processes for each specialist school type with analysis of associated challenges.

PSD disability category	Criteria	Applicable type(s) of specialist school
Intellectual Disability	<p>A diagnosis of Intellectual Disability from a registered psychologist evidenced by:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Sub-average general intellectual functioning which is demonstrated by a full-scale score of two standard deviations or more below the mean score on a standardised individual test of general intelligence. (For example, a full scale score of 70 or below on one of the recommended standardised individual tests of intelligence); Significant deficits in adaptive behaviour established by a composite score of two standard deviations or more below the mean on an approved standardised test of adaptive behaviour. (For example, a Vineland Adaptive Behaviour Scales composite score of 70 or below); and A history and evidence of an ongoing problem with an expectation of continuation during the school years. 	<p>Dual/multi-mode specialist schools</p> <p>Special schools</p> <p>Special developmental schools</p> <p>Supported inclusion schools</p>
Autism Spectrum Disorder	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> A diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder; Significant deficits in adaptive behaviour established by a composite score of two standard deviations or more below the mean on an approved standardised test of adaptive behaviour. (For example, a Vineland Adaptive Behaviour Scales composite score of 70 or below); and Significant deficits in language skills established by a comprehensive speech pathology assessment demonstrating language skills equivalent to a composite score of two standard deviations or more below the mean. (For example, a core language score of 70 or below on one of the recommended comprehensive language tests). 	<p>Autism schools</p>
Physical Disability	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> A significant physical disability; and/or A significant health impairment; and Requires regular paramedical support. 	<p>Physical disability schools</p>
Hearing Impairment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> A bilateral sensori-neural hearing loss that is moderate/severe/profound; and The student requires intervention or assistance to communicate. 	<p>Deaf schools and deaf facilities</p>

In addition to the above, additional criteria may be in place for individual schools. For example, some autism schools have additional criteria pertaining to intellectual disability. These additional criteria vary between individual schools and regions and is described in more detail in recommendation 9. A review of all specialist school's eligibility criteria and enrolment policies was completed in an audit documenting variation between specialist schools of the same school type; further detail can be found in Appendix 4.

Eligibility criteria are based on the Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD) individual student funding model, which is being transitioned out

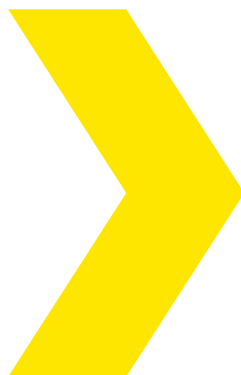
Disability Inclusion introduces a new funding and support model, which will be rolled out across Victoria from 2021 to 2025. The Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD) is the outgoing individual student funding model. Its disability categories remain the basis of the state-wide specialist school eligibility criteria.

Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD)

- The *Program for Students with Disabilities* provides student-level funding to Victorian government schools that support students with disability and high needs.
- The PSD also defines the eligibility criteria and its associated categories to determine if a student can attend a specialist school or setting.

PSD Assessment Service

- The PSD Assessment Service provides assessments for students who may have an intellectual disability (ID) or severe language disorder (SLD), assessments for other disability categories are not undertaken by the assessment service.
- If the school believes a student may have an ID or SLD with critical educational needs, they may make a referral to the students with disability assessment service provided by the department.
- The evaluation of a student's ID and/or SLD will be informed by observations of the student and interviews with their parents/carers and teachers.
- The assessment service does not make a determination on school placement or eligibility for specialist school/setting enrolment; it only conducts the assessments required for the PSD based ID category or SLD category.



Disability Inclusion (DI) Model

- Like the PSD, the Disability Inclusion model provides student-level funding to Victorian government schools to support students with disability and/or other high needs.
- The Disability Inclusion model provides student-level funding based on a functional needs-based assessment, whereas the PSD model provided student-level funding based on diagnostic based criteria.
- The Disability Inclusion model de-couples student-level funding for students with additional needs and eligibility for enrolment in specialist schools.
- The Disability Inclusion funding and support model for students with disability and high needs is being introduced through a staged rollout that commenced in 2021 through to 2025.

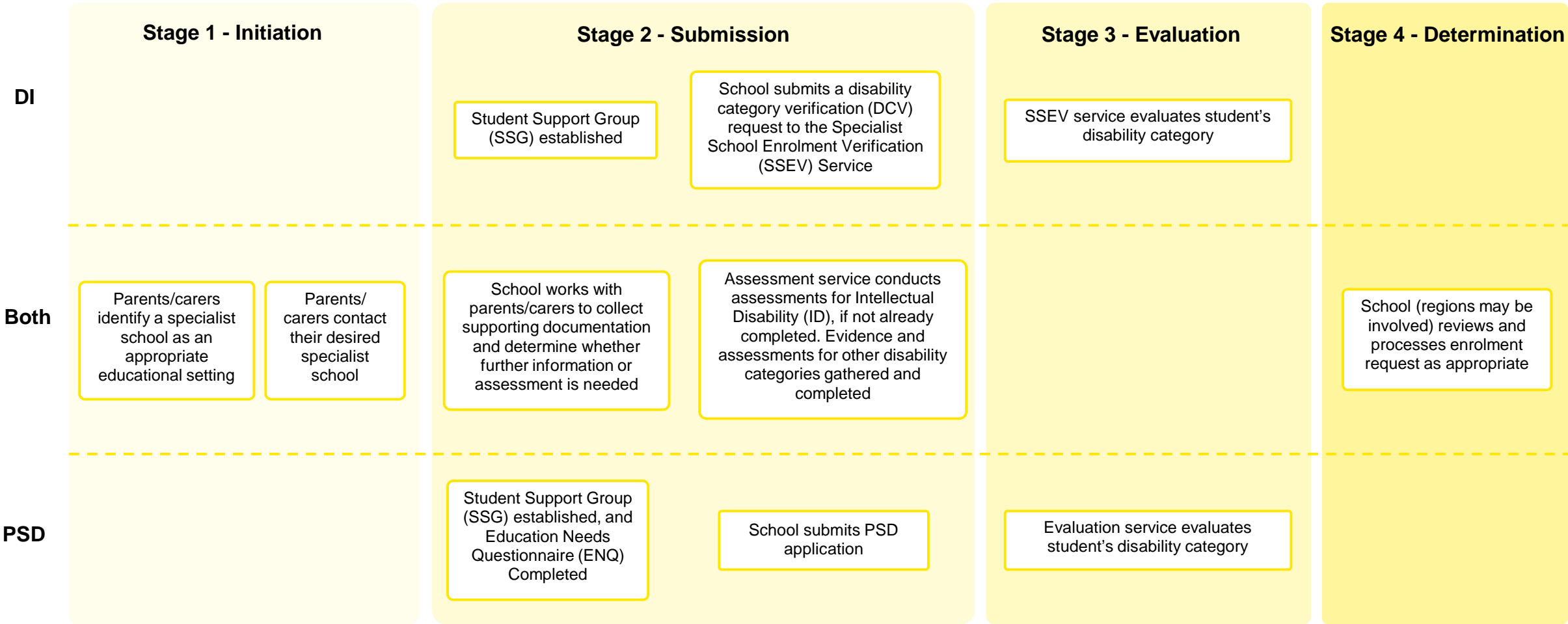
Verification under DI Model

- For a student to enrol in a specialist setting within a Disability Inclusion roll out area, the student must have their disability category verified. These categories are the same as the PSD disability categories and the basis of the state-wide specialist school eligibility criteria.
- Currently, verification under DI can be established via:
 - A disability category verification request submitted to the Specialist School Enrolment Verification Service (SSEV) by the school
 - Current PSD eligibility, including in-date assessments, and under the disability category outlined within the specialist setting's enrolment criteria.

The enrolment process includes steps which add complexity to the journey that parents/carers undertake to enrol their child at a specialist school

Under the Disability Inclusion (DI) and Program for Students with Disability (PSD) models, there are layers of steps at each of the four stages to enrol a student and determine their eligibility for a standard enrolment in their chosen specialist school.

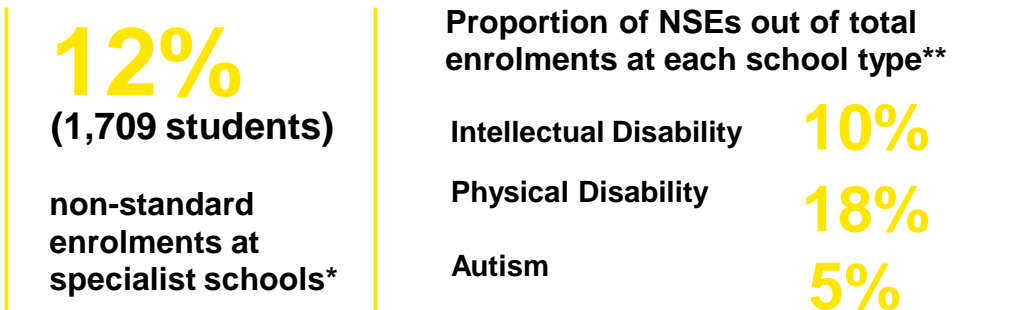
This is a high-level simplified versions of the key steps, each of which contains a number of sub-steps. See Appendix 1 for detailed descriptions of each stage of enrolment. This process reflects the standard enrolment process, by which 88% of enrolment decisions are made, as opposed to the Non-Standard Enrolment process which accounts for the remaining 12% of enrolments.



Appendix 1 provides further detail

Non-standard enrolments can enable students to access specialist schools if they do not meet the current eligibility criteria

Non-Standard Enrolments (NSE) are a form of enrolment for students who do not meet a specialist setting’s enrolment criteria. See Appendix 1 for detailed processes on standard enrolments and when a NSE is typically introduced. NSEs are considered on a case-by-case basis to allow for greater flexibility in Victoria’s specialist school system. Following a standard application process, if the prospective student is found ineligible for their chosen specialist school or setting, the school (in conjunction with the parents/carer) can submit a non-standard enrolment application for an agreed period of time. If approved, specialist settings must review NSEs before the end of the approved enrolment period specified by the regional office in their letter of approval.[#] Current guidance recommends NSE periods are up to 2 years. As this is a regional process, there is no central repository of data collected on NSEs. Some department regional offices capture this data, however, this is not done consistently across the state.



Most common circumstances that lead to an NSE approval

Regional department staff who have the responsibility for coordinating approval of NSEs reported the following circumstances where NSE applications are typically approved:

- IQ assessment results pending or outside of the school's range
- student's functional needs were not being met at their mainstream school
- students from remote areas with limited access to specific settings
- parents/carers, teachers or professionals' recommendation for enrolment at a specialist school
- students who are eligible under one category but borderline or not eligible under the category that aligns with the school's eligibility criteria
- previously met enrolment criteria at student's specialist school, but following review no longer meet criteria.

Department guidance on NSEs

NSEs are considered on a case-by-case basis by the department's regional office. According to department policy, an NSE may be granted considering the following factor(s):

- there is no alternative local specialist schools with enrolment criteria that align with the student’s diagnosis, and the functional needs of the student can be met on a temporary basis by chosen specialist school at which the initial enrolment application took place; and/or
- a student has not yet received a disability diagnosis, but evidence suggests that the student’s functional needs at the point in time could be met on a temporary basis by a locally available specialist setting.

Note: These factors are not a definitive list of all instances where a NSE would be granted.

There are some circumstances when NSEs are not available

Generally, NSEs are not available at a Supported Inclusion School (SIS). However, there are a number of very limited circumstances when an SIS may apply for an NSE. These circumstances include where an out-of-zone student seeks enrolment but does not meet the ID criteria.

NSEs are not available at deaf facilities as they target a specific cohort and are located within a mainstream school (where a student could seek enrolment as per the traditional process).

*This figure is based on assumed and confirmed NSE enrolments. Assumed non-standard enrolments have been determined where a student did not have a specialist school enrolment verification completed as of February 2023. The number of assumed non-standard enrolments may be over-represented, as students can have dual/multiple diagnoses, so where the disability type does not match, the student may be enrolled based on another diagnosis that does match.

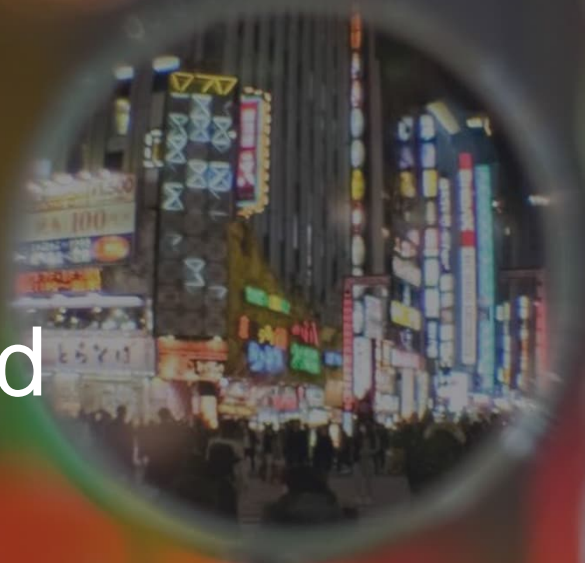
** Data on NSEs at deaf schools was not available.

NOTE: Enrolment Verification applications and processes are ongoing and continue to be submitted throughout the year, and so a number of the non-standard enrolments will become standard enrolments if approved. The data on this page is based on enrolments at 28 February 2023.

Taken from [Enrolment: Enrolment in specialist schools and other specialist education settings | education.vic.gov.au](#)

2

Jurisdictional Scan and Literature Review



A literature review was undertaken to understand contemporary evidence regarding approaches to specialist school eligibility criteria and processes

In undertaking the literature review, we identified a paucity of research directly examining specialist school criteria and processes and the impacts that it has on students, parents/carers. However, there was a range of clinical and educational research that still offered useful insights. The literature reviewed was restricted to articles from reputable, peer-reviewed journals and recently published research was used wherever possible.

The key insights drawn from this research have been summarised below and grouped into three key themes relevant to this review: diagnostic assessments, parent/carer decision making and transitions, as well as centralisation of decision making. The literature review findings have been considered in the recommendations, to improve Victoria's specialist school eligibility criteria and enrolment processes. See Appendix 2 for the detailed literature review.

Diagnostic Assessments

- There are a wide variety of validated, reliable and highly regarded IQ assessments that are appropriate for specific use cases, such as when children are non-verbal or come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.
- There are also a range of factors that clinicians must consider when selecting appropriate assessment tools for the formulation of an assessment of need. For this reason, it is important that clinicians are able to exercise their judgement to enable an appropriately flexible and truly person-centred approach to diagnostic assessment.
- There are assessments used to evaluate functional needs with proven validity and reliability. The value of functional needs assessments is that they allow for holistic consideration of a child's needs, outside of purely diagnostic information. This assists in effectively planning educational provisions.
- This research suggests that although IQ assessments are appropriate for diagnostic purposes, functional needs-based assessments can be more effective at determining a child's level and types of educational need. Assessments of functional needs use a strengths-based approach and have been found to be effective in allocating funding and service provision based on an individual's needs.

Parent/carer decision making and transitions

- Parents/carers of children with disability and high needs face a difficult process when determining their preferred educational setting for their child, which can result in them being unsatisfied with their decisions due to a lack of information or constrained school options. This highlights the need for parents/carers to be supported and provided with enough clear information to make a well-informed choice.
- There are a wide range of factors that influence parents/carers' decisions to transfer their children from mainstream schooling to a specialist school. Many of these factors relate to extra-educational experiences and are not tied to schooling outcomes, indicating that the demand for specialist schools is influenced by the extent to which mainstream schools can offer truly inclusive experiences.
- These findings indicate that Victoria should focus on providing clear information so parents/carers can make well-informed decisions around enrolling their child with disability in a specialist school or their local mainstream school. Furthermore, these findings highlight that the department's work towards disability inclusion in mainstream schools should continue to be a focus, as previous experiences in mainstream schools is a factor which influences parents' and carers' decisions to transfer their child to a specialist school.

Centralisation of Decision Making

- Localised decision-making processes that foster school autonomy can result in collaborative environments that promote inclusivity and efficiency. However, a mixed model that offers a blend of centralised consistency and local autonomy is likely to offer the best outcomes and ensure efforts are aligned towards a clear goal.
- This finding is relevant to Victoria's current approach to specialist school enrolment, in which decision-making occurs at the school or regional level and eligibility criteria is driven centrally by the department. This research indicates that Victoria's blend of regional and central decision-making is consistent with successful practices elsewhere, however more localised autonomy, such as at the school level could be further considered.

Functional needs are a key focus of contemporary approaches for providing support to people with disability

A key theme that consistently arose during our literature review, jurisdictional scan and consultations was the contemporary move towards consideration of 'functional need' when determining educational provision for people with disability. Currently, the newly introduced Disability Inclusion Profile uses a functional needs-based assessment to determine funding levels for support to students with disability and high needs, however, currently there are limited functional assessments included in the eligibility criteria for enrolment to a specialist school in Victoria. The current diagnostic-focused eligibility criteria used in Victoria are contrary to a worldwide shift toward a more holistic, strengths-based assessment of need. Furthermore, functional assessments provide a more informed view of students' educational needs than a diagnosis does, offering an effective approach to matching students with school placements based on their individual needs.

What are functional needs?

A 'functional needs' assessment identifies strengths and challenges in participating in daily activities (e.g. in the school, home or community setting) and can inform planning for interventions/adjustments. This approach is distinct from a 'diagnostic' evaluation of need, which seeks to evaluate whether a student meets criteria for a given condition. A functional needs assessment will typically identify individual strengths, challenges and support needs in particular skill areas. Therefore, a functional needs approach is a strengths-based approach that can better inform the supports and adjustments that students with disability will need to learn.

Case Study of the Functional Assessment – NDIS

The use of functional needs assessment is an emerging practice across governments. The NDIS has introduced the *NDIS Functional Assessment*, a tool with three modules which aims to measure the abilities to perform daily life tasks in everyday places. The Functional Capacity Assessments has the most relevance to the department's context, as it assesses the ability and needs across 35 essential life tasks including communication, mobility, self-care, social participation, learning and working. The assessment was introduced on the 7th of September 2020 and has been proven to be an effective, comprehensive assessment which provides a reliable basis for understanding the needs of people with disability.

Nationally Consistent Collection of Data

The NCCD (Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on school students with disability) defines functional needs as a student's educational and support needs across a range of domains which may include, but are not limited to:

- **key learning areas** - changes are required in curriculum and teaching practices to enable a student to achieve the learning outcomes described in syllabus documents
- **communication** - a student's ability to receive and understand information being conveyed by others (receptive language) and a student's ability to convey a message to others (expressive language)
- **participation** - a student's ability to engage in successful interactions and participate effectively in the full school program (social competence) and the management strategies required to ensure a student's safety (safety and wellbeing)
- **personal care** - essential hygiene routines that require intensive individual management to support participation (hygiene), eating/drinking/dietary needs which require individual management (eating and dietary), and the procedures specified in an individual health care plan that require specialised support (health care procedures)
- **movement** - a student's level of functional independence in mobility and positioning (mobility and positioning) and a student's ability to use the hand motor skills required to participate in learning activities (hand motor skills).

Miltenberger, R. G., Valbuena, D., & Sanchez, S. (2019). *Functional Assessment of Challenging Behavior*. Current Developmental Disorders Reports, 6, 202–208. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40474-019-00180-y>

Sigafoos, J., Lang, R., & Rispoli, M. (2021). *Definition and Rationale for Functional Assessment*. In: Matson, J.L. (eds) *Functional Assessment for Challenging Behaviors and Mental Health Disorders*. Autism and Child Psychopathology Series. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-66270-7_1

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2019). *1 Introduction*. In *Functional Assessment for Adults with Disabilities*. The National Academies Press. <https://www.nap.edu/read/25663/chapter/3>

Approaches to specialist school eligibility vary across Australian jurisdictions

Four Eastern-Australian states were examined as part of this review due to their similarities to Victoria in legislative environment, principles, and the history of their specialist education system. Overall, it was found that New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory use a level of diagnostic assessment in the determination of eligibility for specialist schools. However, New South Wales and South Australia have incorporated a view of functional needs of students when assessing their eligibility for specialist schools. See Appendix 3, for detailed information and insights from Australian jurisdictions**.



*Please note that on the following pages 'specialist school' is used as an umbrella term to refer to all schools that specifically cater to students with disability. It should be noted that the terminology for these schools, and the cohorts that they cater to, differs somewhat between jurisdictions.

** Please also note that the detailed Appendix 3 jurisdictional scan contains further references. Data quoted in relation to each jurisdiction was sourced from the respective jurisdiction during consultation.

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Approach to assessment varies

- NSW, Qld, SA and the ACT use a level of diagnostic assessment in the determination of eligibility for specialist schools. This is in line with Victoria's current approach to eligibility for specialist schools. However, NSW and SA incorporate a view of functional needs of students when assessing their eligibility for specialist schools.
- Comparison to Victoria: Victoria does not account for the holistic needs of students in its current eligibility criteria for standard enrolments and would benefit from strengthening functional needs to align with the world's most effective practice.

Functional needs

- SA has recently updated its eligibility criteria to consider functional needs and recognise all disabilities and learning difficulties, including mental health and trauma. The updated criteria in South Australia may provide a useful map for incorporating functional needs and suitability considerations into the eligibility for specialist schools in the Australian context.
- In addition to eligibility, there are suitability guidelines which determine a student's eligibility for a specialist school, specialist classroom and disability unit. These considerations include whether the specialist schooling provision meets the parents/carer's needs and whether the low scores be attributed to another factor such as a neuro developmental disorder.
- In NSW, learning difficulties, as well as co-morbid diagnoses are considered as part of the enrolment process, providing a more holistic assessment of student need
- Comparison to Victoria: By using broader factors that may influence a student's learning needs, as demonstrated in South Australia, Victoria can leverage these factors in its eligibility criteria and processes to gain a more fulsome picture of a student's needs.

Flexibility in the process reduces friction

- In Qld, during the application process for enrolment, temporary attendance at specialist schools is made available. This allowance may reduce the stress felt by parents/carers when seeking specialist education settings for their child; however, it may negatively impact students who are subsequently found ineligible for a specialist school. Feedback from parents/carers in Victoria indicates that the enrolment application process can be stressful and time consuming.
- Comparison to Victoria: Victorian parents, carers and students may experience less strain if Queensland's flexible approach to student placement was leveraged.

Approaches to specialist school eligibility vary across Australian jurisdictions

Four Eastern-Australian states were examined as part of this review due to their similarities to Victoria in legislative environment, principles, and the history of their specialist education system. This page outlines key insights from Australian states that offer alternative approaches and features compared to the Victorian specialist school system.

Queensland



No Mandated Eligibility Reviews: Once a student has been found to be eligible for enrolment in a Queensland specialist school, they are guaranteed enrolment for the duration of their schooling, with no mandated reviews. This significantly reduces the stress and burden placed on students and parents/carers.

Clinical Judgement in Assessment Tools: Queensland requires only that clinicians use validated and reliable assessments when diagnosing students with intellectual disability but does not mandate which ones are used. This allows for test administrators to exercise their judgement on which assessments are most appropriate for individual children and reduces the need for students to be re-assessed.

Comparison to Victoria

- Queensland has a greater proportion of its government school student population enrolled at its specialist schools (5%) than Victoria (2%).
- In Victoria, specialist settings are required to undertake periodic reviews of the enrolment eligibility of all enrolled students to determine whether they continue to be best placed in their current setting, including whether they continue to meet any relevant enrolment criteria. The year 6-7 review point is mandatory for students receiving PSD funding, excluding students who receive PSD funding at levels 5 or 6. By contrast, Queensland has no recommended eligibility review points for students once they are enrolled at a specialist school.
- Unlike Queensland, Victoria outlines a specific range of assessment tools used by clinicians to inform the determination of a student's specialist school eligibility. It has been reported in consultations that Victoria has taken this approach to ensure consistency of measurement. Queensland has taken an alternative approach to Victoria by enabling clinical judgement of a wider range of assessment tools.

New South Wales



Consideration of Comorbid Diagnoses: New South Wales uses diagnosis as the basis of its eligibility criteria; however, co-morbid diagnoses are considered when determining eligibility for specialist settings. This approach may ensure that students' needs are considered more holistically.

Decision-making at Mainstream School Level: Mainstream schools are the center of the enrolment process for specialist settings in NSW. The decision to pursue enrolment at a specialist school focuses on if the student needs adjustments outside of what the mainstream school can offer, rather than if the student meets the threshold for eligibility for a specialist school. If mainstream schools are the centre of the process, it may nudge them to take further steps towards inclusion of students with disability.

Comparison to Victoria

- New South Wales has 3% of its total government school student population attending specialist schools, with an additional 2% attending specialist classrooms in mainstream schools. By contrast, Victoria has 2% of its total student population attending specialist schools and specialist settings.
- Victoria's eligibility determinations are based on a student's 'primary' diagnoses. Whereas in New South Wales specific consideration is given to co-morbid diagnoses.
- Currently the process to seek additional education support for students with disability and high needs in Victoria can be situated at mainstream and specialist schools. By contrast, mainstream schools in New South Wales are the focus point for the provision of support for students with disability and high needs.

Approaches to specialist school eligibility vary across Australian jurisdictions

Four Eastern-Australian states were examined as part of this review due to their similarities to Victoria in legislative environment, principles, and the history of their specialist education system. This page outlines key insights from states that offer alternative approaches and features to the Victorian specialist school system.

South Australia



Functional Needs and Suitability Considerations: South Australia's eligibility criteria for specialist school enrolment requires a diagnosis of intellectual disability, fulfillment of its functional needs criteria and additional suitability considerations. These changes have been recently introduced in South Australia to ensure that specialist school placement is practical and meets parents' and carers' needs.

Department Funded Assessments: In South Australia, assessments for intellectual disability to determine eligibility for specialist schools are completed by the department's psychologists and school services. This reduces the cost and administration barriers for parents/carers seeking enrolment. It should be noted that like the South Australia, Victoria's approach also reduces the cost and administration barriers for parents/carers seeking enrolment.

Australian Capital Territory



School Psychologist Support for Parents/Carers: In the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), parents/carers are supported through the specialist school enrolment process by a school psychologist, who discusses how a specialist school can offer supports and completes the enrolment application on their behalf. This means that parents/carers are supported throughout the journey of enrolment to a specialist school and reduces the administrative burden on parents/carers to navigate the enrolment process.

Comparison to Victoria

- Victoria's eligibility criteria has a greater emphasis on a diagnosis of intellectual disability than South Australia. The introduction of blended criteria which includes elements of both functional and diagnostic assessments in South Australia provides a useful case study for Victoria if it shifts its focus towards functional needs in its eligibility criteria.
- Both South Australia and Victoria's education departments provide funding for assessments to determine eligibility for their specialist schools. Victoria has a contracted assessment service as well as department funded psychologists and school services to undertake assessments, while South Australia does not have an external assessment service offering.

Comparison to Victoria

- In Victoria, there is no formalised role that supports parents/carers navigate the specialist school enrolment process. However, Victorian principals, regional disability coordinators and CLO's (among other roles) may provide support to parents/carers to navigate the system informally. Victoria could consider implementing a similar case management role, like in the ACT to support parents/carers going through the specialist school enrolment process to ease the burden placed upon them.
- It is important to note that the ACT has a significantly smaller population, and a smaller student population than Victoria and comparisons between the states are limited due to this.

International approaches to specialist school eligibility offer insights regarding how the experiences of parents/carers can be improved

New Zealand, United Kingdom, Ireland, Canada, United States and Switzerland have been examined to determine effective practice and innovative approaches which may be relevant for Victoria's specialist school eligibility requirements and processes. Countries included in the jurisdictional scan were identified and considered due to the comparability with Victoria. Similarities to Victoria include:

- legislative environment and context
- specialist education systems funded and managed by the states or local governments
- shared principles of inclusion and parent/carer choice.

Ireland and Switzerland's approaches were explored as they use internationally recognised frameworks for assessing and classifying disability, developed by the World Health Organisation. For example;

- Ireland uses the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), and the World Health Organisation (WHO) Disability Assessment Schedule to assess disability based on functional assessments, designed to be internationally standardised and easily administered.
- Switzerland was one of the first countries to implement a multidimensional, context-sensitive assessment and process to establish eligibility in education systems. This new eligibility procedure is based on the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health developed by the World Health Organisation.

Jurisdictions such as New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Canada use a functional needs-based assessment for determining eligibility for specialist schools; these were explored to obtain a view of how functional needs assessments operate within a specialist education system. See Appendix 3 for detailed information and insights from international jurisdictions.

Some countries evaluate eligibility on functional needs.

- New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Ontario, Canada all determine eligibility for specialist schools purely based on functional needs of students, with no diagnostic criteria used in the determination of eligibility. This contrasts with Victoria, where eligibility is determined based on assessment of a disability in line with the disability categories outlined in the current state section of this report.

Some countries have support officers to inform parents, carers and stakeholders of the process requirements.

- In Ireland, specialist education needs organisers are present at each school to liaise with national specialist education bodies to support parents/carers through the enrolment process. Additionally, Ireland has a National Educational Psychological Service which provides support to students and assists schools and parents/carers to identify additional learning needs. This is distinct from Victoria, as Irish schools have more support roles available to identify learning needs of students and support parents, carers and teachers through the process of gaining further support for the student.
- Mainstream schools in New Zealand and the UK also have specialist education needs officers and coordinators present to support needs of students and provide support to parents, carers and the school.

New Zealand funds all assessments required for eligibility determination.

- For New Zealand, initial assessments of eligibility for enrolment to specialist schools are undertaken by parents/carers, teachers and specialised early intervention teachers employed by the Ministry of Education and therapists. In Victoria, outside of assessments for eligibility based on the intellectual disability category, parents/carers must fund the assessments undertaken by clinicians to determine a diagnosis. For the intellectual disability category, the department funds an external assessment and verification service to determine eligibility for specialist schools in Victoria. Efficiencies in the assessment and enrolment process would better support parents/carers with the cost of diagnosis and enrolment in specialist schools.

International approaches to specialist school eligibility offer insights regarding how the experiences of parents/carers can be improved

New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Ireland and Canada have been examined to determine effective practice and innovative approaches which provides insights relevant to Victoria's specialist school eligibility requirements and processes. Countries included in the jurisdictional scan were identified and considered due to the comparability with Victoria. Similarities to Victoria include: Legislative environment and context; Specialist education systems funded and managed by the states or local governments; Shared principles of inclusion and parent/carer choice. Highlighted on this page are key insights from these international jurisdictions.

United Kingdom



Request for Assessments Beyond Parents/carers: In the UK, a request for assessment to determine specialist school eligibility can be made by anyone who thinks it may be necessary, including doctors, health visitors, teachers, parents/carers, and family friends, with the parent/carer's consent. This reduces administrative burden placed on parents.

Furthermore, in the UK a young person can request an eligibility assessment themselves if they're aged 16 to 25, highlighting the agency provided to young people with additional learning needs. This provision ensures students themselves are provided with choice and support for those that may have non-'traditional' parents/carer situations. The UK has a Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCo) role within all schools, which supports parents/carers and schools to support students with special education needs

Comparison to Victoria

- The UK has 2.8% of its students at government schools attending a specialist school, this is in comparison to Victoria's 2%. The similarities in the proportion of the student population at specialist schools in the UK and Victoria means that the UK is a useful point of comparison for the Victorian system.
- The administrative burden on parents/carers is less in the UK compared to Victoria as relevant individuals (with parent/carer consent) in the UK can request an assessment for a student with additional learning needs who may be better supported at a specialist school. Unlike Victoria, the UK also allows young people to request an assessment for themselves, this enables choice and accounts for young people in non-'traditional' parent/carer situations.
- Importantly, the United Kingdom's eligibility criteria is based on an educational needs assessment of the student, and there is no cost to parents. Victoria can take key lessons learnt from the UK if it shifts towards strengthening a functional needs approach.

New Zealand



Holistic criteria: New Zealand's eligibility criteria do not require specific diagnoses or diagnostic assessments for a student to access specialist educational needs funding. Instead, criteria are based on a student having high combined needs or very-high functional needs that are categorised into domains, such as learning, hearing, language use and more.

Special Education Needs Coordinator Role: New Zealand has a Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCo) role within all schools, which supports parents/carers and schools to support students with special education needs. SENCos can also recommend parents/carers apply for specialist schools.

Comparison to Victoria

- New Zealand's specialist schools cater to approximately 1% of government school students, a narrower proportion compared to Victoria (2%). Consultations suggested that New Zealand's specialist schools cater to a cohort of students with higher needs than in Victoria.
- The eligibility criteria for specialist schools in New Zealand are based purely on a student's needs assessment, by contrast Victoria's criteria place a high emphasis on diagnostic assessments. Victoria may find New Zealand's eligibility criteria useful in determining its own functional needs assessments for enrolment to specialist schools.
- The Victorian system does not have an equivalent formal role to the SENCo in New Zealand. However, support can be provided informally by various positions that support parents/carers of students with specialised education needs.

International approaches to specialist school eligibility offer insights regarding how the experiences of parents/carers can be improved

New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Ireland and Canada have been examined to determine effective practice and innovative approaches which provides insights relevant to Victoria’s specialist school eligibility requirements and processes. Countries included in the jurisdictional scan were identified and considered due to the comparability with Victoria. Similarities to Victoria include: Legislative environment and context; Specialist education systems funded and managed by the states or local governments; Shared principles of inclusion and parent/carer choice. Highlighted on this page are key insights from these international jurisdictions.

Ireland



Special Education Needs Organiser Role: Ireland has a Special Education Needs Organiser as a role within each school. This role liaises between the school, parents/carers, Health Service Executive and other services within the special education system in Ireland. The presence of this role supports parents/carers to connect with relevant parties that contribute towards students’ enrolment at specialist schools.

Ontario, Canada



Decision-making Autonomy at School Board Level: In Ontario, local school boards have the autonomy to determine the learning needs of a student and how these needs may be met. This decision is informed by consideration of formal assessments, and information shared by parents, carers and support services staff. This model may ensure that students receive a more tailored educational experience that can flexibly adapt to changing needs as local education experts can make decisions as close to the student as possible.

Comparison to Victoria

- Compared to Victoria, Ireland caters to a smaller proportion of students at its government specialist schools (less than 1%).
- Ireland uses a blend of functional needs and diagnostic assessments as the basis of its eligibility criteria, while Victoria has a greater emphasis on diagnostic assessments.
- Victoria does not have a formal role within its education system which supports students, parents/carers to navigate specialist educational support or to liaise with relevant parties to obtain enrolment at a specialist school. By comparison, a function of this sort is present in Ireland, New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

Comparison to Victoria

- Like Victoria, Ontario shares the vision for an inclusive education system where all students can be educated together in common learning environments. Due to its focus on inclusive education, Canada has a high number of students with disabilities in mainstream classes (16.3%) receiving resource assistance or special education support. Because there are no formal specialist schools in Ontario, insights from this jurisdiction may be limited in its relevance to Victorian specialist schools, but more relevant to students with DI Profiles or PSD funding at mainstream schools.
- One insight we can obtain from Ontario is that decision-making on the provision of support to students with disability or high needs is located locally at the school board level. This may provide greater flexibility and a more tailored educational experience for students with disability and high needs in schools in Ontario than in Victoria, where decisions on provision of support are made at a regional or central level.



Findings

Our findings were informed by an extensive research and consultation process

Over a span of six months, numerous in-depth consultations were conducted with key stakeholders from across Victoria’s specialist school ecosystem, as well as other jurisdictions. The research and consultation process is outlined below:

System Data & Literature Review

Partnering with the department, we conducted a desktop review of available information, and data relating to specialist school eligibility criteria, types of enrolments, provision and capacity. A literature review examined evidence relating to best-practice approaches to specialist school eligibility criteria.

System-wide consultation and surveys

Surveys were conducted with a wide range of stakeholders:

111	parents/carer responses	16	current and former student responses	63	specialist school or setting principal responses
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And were supplemented by a range of focus groups and interviews:


13	parents/carers	30+	central & regional department staff	40	specialist and mainstream school leaders
1	former student	8	disability organisations	16	experts & clinicians
				20+	external jurisdiction school leaders & departmental staff

Jurisdictional Scan

We engaged with key stakeholders to discuss approaches to specialist school eligibility criteria and processes in a number of Australian jurisdictions, as well as internationally.


Jurisdictions from New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Canada were included in this process.

This process allowed us to develop a comprehensive understanding of the state of Victoria’s specialist school eligibility criteria and processes, summarised below:




The specialist school eligibility criteria and processes do appear to allow most students whose learning and wellbeing outcomes would be well supported by a specialist school to enrol in them.

However



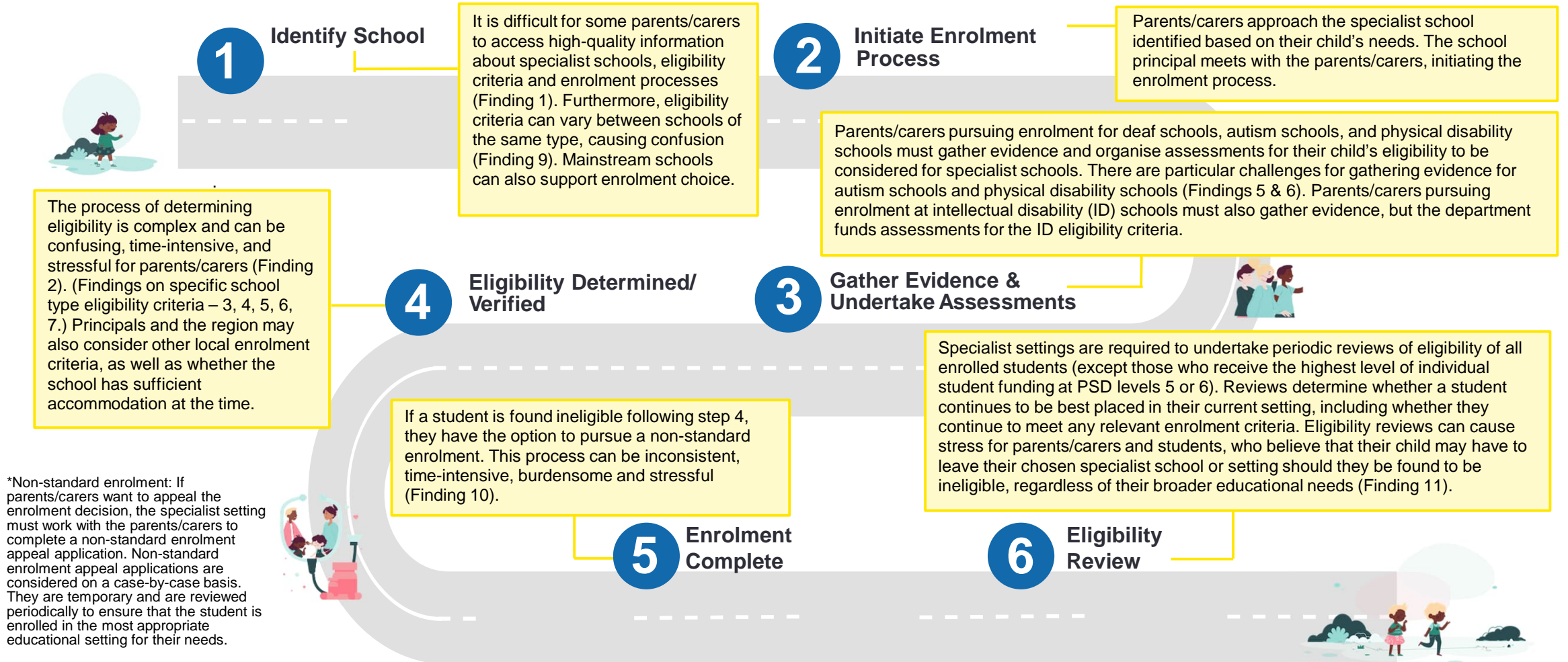
The processes of enrolling in a specialist school is often stressful, burdensome, expensive and time-consuming for some parents/carers, regardless of their child’s eligibility, making it difficult for parents/carers to exercise choice.



There are some students whose learning and wellbeing outcomes would be well supported by a specialist school that are deemed ineligible due to the nature of the criteria.

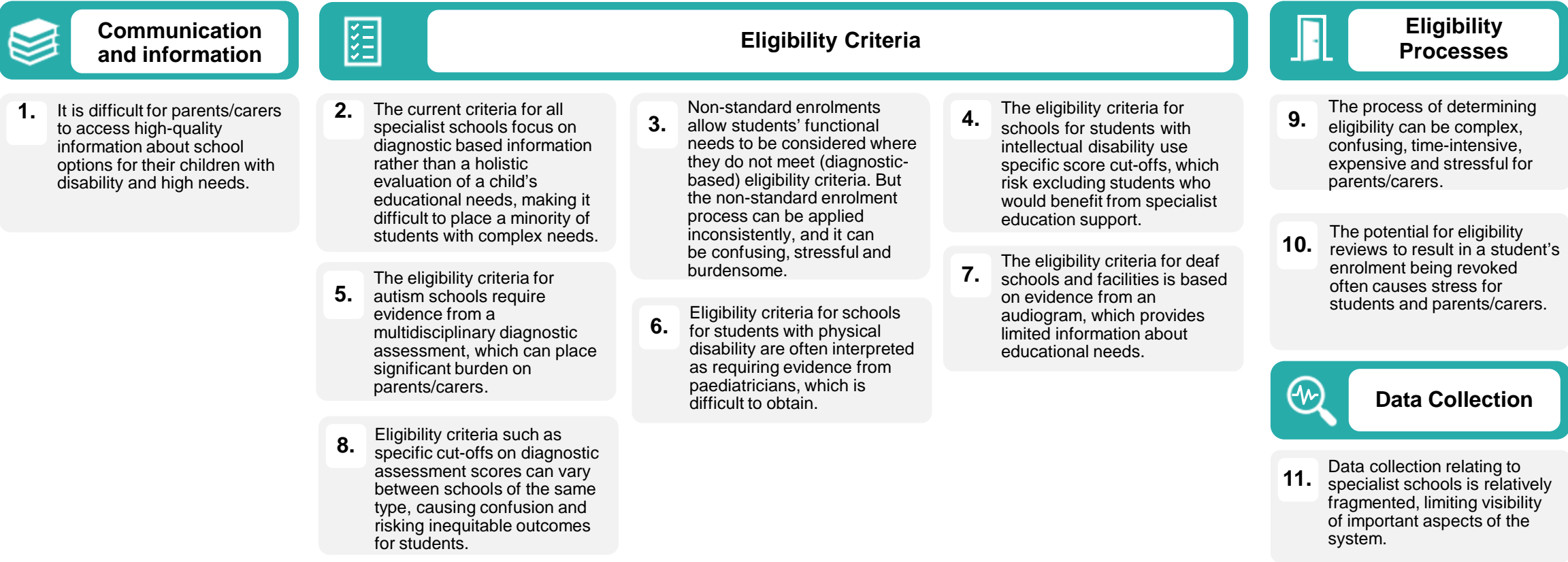
The current enrolment process and experience for parents/carers can be uncertain and stressful

Based on consultations with specialist school principals, parents/carers and stakeholder groups, this journey map represents some of the challenges experienced by some parents/carers as they seek to enrol their child into a specialist school in Victoria. Key challenges for some parents/carers revolve around limited information and choice, delays in enrolment processes and anxiety associated with eligibility requirements (note the role of mainstream schools in supporting students with disability is not included in this process map). It is important to note that this page is not an exhaustive list of the challenges faced by parents/carers in the enrolment process, nor does it suggest that these challenges are the experience of all parents/carers as the enrolment process can be straight forward for some.



Eleven findings were made regarding parental/carer choice, family and student experiences and department capability to administer the system

Detailed findings have been developed from our research and consultation process. These findings have been grouped into four key themes, as outlined below and are discussed in detail in the following pages.





Communication and Information

Theme 1



The better the question. The better the answer.
The better the world works.

1. It is difficult for parents/carers to access high-quality information about school options for their children with disability and high needs

Current State

The department currently stores information about school options for students with disability and high needs across a number of websites. A list of these websites is included in Appendix 5.

The Problem

There are a number of problems with the information provided on these websites.

In many cases, websites contain some information that is useful to parents/carers but lack other crucial information that parents/carers are directed to find on other websites or must search for themselves. For example, the 'Find my School' website is an excellent tool for helping parents/carers to identify schools that are in their local area, but it does not help them understand which ones are relevant to their child's needs. Links are provided to each school's website; however, the quality of these sites is inconsistent, and many are out of date or poorly maintained, even though specialist schools are required to display their criteria on their website.

Where websites do contain information about specialist school enrolment and processes, it is often presented in a complex manner that may be confusing for parents/carers. Many sites also contain multiple links to internal departmental resources that parents/carers cannot access. This makes the intended audience of the websites unclear and makes it more likely that parents/carers will have a confusing and frustrating experience. None of these websites present a clear, concise, step-by-step overview of the enrolment process that can help parents/carers to understand what the enrolment process looks like and what they can expect.

Parents/carers that are not able to get the information that they need from these websites will often seek guidance from community groups, early childhood educators, clinicians, teachers, advice and social media sites instead. Only 16% of parents/carers surveyed reported finding information about specialist schools and their criteria using a web search. While these sources of advice can provide excellent support, this also introduces the risk that parents/carers are receiving inconsistent, outdated, and incorrect information.

Impact on Parents/Carers

It is very difficult for parents/carers to access high-quality information about eligibility criteria and enrolment processes for specialist schools, as well as the purpose and practices of these schools more generally.

This creates a risk that parents/carers will have an inaccurate understanding of eligibility criteria and processes, which can result in them having unrealistic expectations. Furthermore, these misunderstandings can cause parents/carers to gather evidence that is insufficient or irrelevant, resulting in wasted time.

This lack of clarity also creates significant uncertainty, stress, and frustration for parents/carers, making the process of enrolling their child in a specialist school significantly more difficult.

This also introduces a clear risk of inequitable outcomes, as parents/carers with access to better guidance or information will have better experiences.

As other stakeholders such as clinicians and early childhood educators may have a varied understanding of accurate information on specialist schools, this can result in them directing parents/carers towards them when their children have disability, without consideration of whether a mainstream school could meet their needs.

Talking to the schools made things clearer, but their websites and reception desks were no help at all

- Parents and carer survey response

Both completing required assessments and accessing information about the school eligibility criteria and process were difficult

- Parents and carer survey response

90% of surveyed PASS (Principals Association of Specialist Schools Victoria) principals agreed or strongly agreed that parents/carers struggle to understand the difference between different types of specialist schools

92% of surveyed PASS principals agreed or strongly agreed that it is difficult for parents/carers to understand the eligibility criteria and process information available about eligibility criteria and processes

42% of surveyed parents/carers said it was somewhat easy or extremely easy to work out if their child was eligible for their chosen specialist school or setting

Eligibility Criteria

Theme 2



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2. The current criteria for all specialist schools focus on diagnoses rather than a holistic evaluation of a child’s educational needs

Current State

In most cases, the current specialist school eligibility criteria focus on establishing whether a student has a valid diagnosis that falls into a disability category relevant to a school’s specialisation, and use the Program for Students with Disability (PSD) categories to do so. For example, the eligibility criteria for schools that specialise in catering to students with intellectual disability mirror diagnostic criteria used to diagnose intellectual disability. At schools for students with physical disability the criteria require that students have a significant physical disability or health impairment with need for regular paramedical support, with evidence from clinicians. For more details of the criteria and evidence required for each school, refer to the current state section of this report. In some cases, these criteria incorporate additional clinical information, such as scores on language assessments for autism schools, to determine whether the student’s likely support needs are matched to the school’s specialised education program and supports.

The Problem

Although information obtained through diagnostic assessments can help to predict what a student’s educational needs and capabilities *might* look like, diagnostic information alone is not sufficient to provide a holistic understanding of a student’s educational needs. This is because diagnostic assessments are designed to provide clinicians with clinical information rather than an understanding of a student’s capabilities and support needs in a classroom setting. There is also significant comorbidity across the student population. For example, many autistic children also have intellectual disability or hearing loss, and the nature of the criteria can make it difficult to determine which setting would be most appropriate for them. There are a range of elements of a student’s educational need that are not assessed by these diagnostic criteria, including:

- the capacity of students to engage with learning in a classroom setting
- the educational support that students need to fully engage in classroom learning
- the ability of students to physically navigate school environments
- the ability of students to appropriately engage socially with their peers
- the capabilities and capacity of students’ parents/carers.

Importantly, schools for students with intellectual disability and autism schools both use eligibility criteria that include an assessment of adaptive behaviour, which is a construct similar to functional needs. Although this measure provides some useful insights for educators, it is intended to be a global assessment and is not designed specifically for use in an educational context. For this reason, it does not provide sufficient detail to fully understand a student’s educational needs. This deficit in understanding offered by diagnostic assessments was a clear motivation behind the department developing Disability Inclusion Profiles to determine the need for individualised funding, which are explicitly intended to assess functional need.

“ There needs to be some degree of flexibility as opposed to black and white criteria. Each case needs to be assessed by looking at all the needs of the child as a whole - **Parents and carer survey response**

59% of respondents to the specialist school principal survey said they somewhat frequently or frequently see students unable to enrol in their school as a result of falling narrowly outside of eligibility criteria.

“ Find a way to reduce stress on parents/carers during such a challenging time, I believe this means investing in understanding the individual child and family - **Specialist School Principal survey response**

Impact on Parents/Carers

As the criteria focus on diagnostic based information rather than the holistic educational needs of students, it will be difficult for them to effectively identify which students would benefit the most from a specialist school. This makes it difficult for parents/carers to make informed decisions about where to place their children.

Furthermore, this creates a clear risk of ‘false negatives’, in which students whose learning and wellbeing outcomes would be well supported by a specialist setting are found ineligible. In these cases, many parents/carers will choose to apply for a non-standard enrolment to their chosen school, which requires additional time and effort and often results in further stress and frustration for the family.

Importantly, the diagnostic nature of the criteria also raises the risk of ‘false positives’, in which students whose learning and wellbeing outcomes would be well supported by a mainstream school are found eligible. For these students, enrolment in a specialist school presents a clear risk that they may have less access to educational opportunities that they would otherwise have benefited from, and which some specialist schools may be unable to provide. While it is not possible to determine how often this happens with existing data, the review found no evidence of ‘false positives’.

3. Non-standard enrolments allow students’ functional needs to be considered, but they are applied inconsistently and the process can be confusing and burdensome

Non-standard enrolments (NSEs) offer an avenue for students to attend specialist schools when they do not meet the diagnostically based eligibility criteria. In such cases, the enrolment is granted in recognition of their functional needs, which are deemed to make a specialist school an appropriate setting for supporting their learning and wellbeing outcomes.

Current State

1,709

Number of non-standard enrolments at specialist schools, accounting for 12% of specialist school enrolments*

The number of NSEs across the state indicates the total number of students enrolled in specialist schools who do not meet their current eligibility criteria. As NSEs are granted to students based on their functional needs (which are not addressed by the criteria), this indicates that the current eligibility criteria do not account for the functional needs of up to 12% of the student population, or approximately 1,700 students. Importantly, these are all students for whom a specialist school has been identified as an appropriate setting to support their learning and wellbeing outcomes.

Impact on Parents/Carers

Completing an NSE application can be a time-consuming and burdensome process for parents, carers and school staff. NSEs follow a standard enrolment application process that is also often time-consuming and burdensome.

Once approved, the frequent reviews required for NSEs can continue to cause significant stress and burden for parents/carers. 97% of principals surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that NSEs that require annual reviews of eligibility may result in significant stress for parents, carers and students that are uncertain of their future and lack stability. Note that the frequency of these reviews is variable and defined by the region when approving a NSE, however guidance from the department recommends they occur at least once every two years.

Note: The NSE application process has been implemented relatively recently, it was reported by departmental staff that the process is yet to mature.

* Deaf schools and facilities data on NSEs were not available. The data on this page is based on enrolments at 28 February 2023. Enrolment Verification applications and processes are ongoing and continue to be submitted throughout the year, and so a number of the non-standard enrolments will become standard enrolments if approved.

The Problem

The NSE process is inconsistent and can take a significant amount of time to complete

The process used to consider and grant NSEs appears to vary between regions, however it is difficult to determine where and to what extent this occurs due to limited availability of information. After a school submits an NSE request the process can take up to four months to be completed, however the reason for these delays is not well-understood due to the availability of data and significant variations in practice. This lack of clarity, and the time required to complete the process, can result in a significant amount of stress for parents/carers.

After being provided with an NSE, students are required to have their enrolment reviewed at least once every two years, which may cause additional stress and burden for parents/carers. This process also places a high administrative burden on principals and school staff who may have to regularly navigate the process for multiple students.

Anonymous Regional Disability Coordinator 2024

Some schools have no students enrolled using an NSE and others have up to 20% of their enrolments through an NSE. This is not only a huge administrative task for schools but also for the Regional Disability Coordinators who support the school

Specialist school principals reported significant variation in how flexibly their school accepts NSEs:

Q4 - 4. How flexible is your school in accepting students that don't meet the eligibility criteria through non-standard enrolments?

Very Flexible	10%
Somewhat Flexible	43%
Neutral	18%
Not Flexible	20%
Not Flexible at All	10%

Decision-making on granting a non-standard enrolment has often been a very slow process

Anonymous Regional Disability Coordinator 2024

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EY

4. The eligibility criteria for schools for students with intellectual disability use specific score cut-offs, which risks excluding students with valid diagnoses

Current State

In the current eligibility criteria for schools for students with intellectual disability, specific test score ‘cut-offs’ are used to establish thresholds for eligibility. This means students that score above two standard deviations below the mean (i.e. above 70) on assessments of adaptive behaviour and IQ are deemed ineligible for enrolment.

Further specific score cut-offs are applied at special developmental schools (SDS), which cater to students with moderate to profound intellectual disability. Students applying to these schools must score below 50 or 55 (it varies between individual schools) to be deemed eligible for enrolment. Detailed criteria can be found in Appendix 1.

In cases where children have not already had relevant assessments conducted, or if their assessments are out-of-date, they are referred to the contracted assessment service for assessment. The assessment service will first conduct an assessment of adaptive behaviour, and if the student's score is below the aforementioned threshold, they will then conduct an IQ assessment. In this sense, the assessment service uses the adaptive behaviour assessment as a ‘screener’ to identify the students that require an IQ assessment, which is much more intensive and time-consuming to administer, thereby reducing the need for unnecessary burden.

The Problem

The application of specific test score ‘cut-offs’ is not aligned to contemporary clinical guidance and may result in students who have a valid diagnosis of intellectual disability (or are waiting for one) being excluded from a specialist school. 76% of surveyed specialist school principals agreed or strongly agreed that applying strict diagnostic criteria to determine eligibility may exclude students whose needs would otherwise benefit from specialist education support.

“ The damage done to kids [due to the specific test score] has not been okay. When at review they test out and then go to mainstream, then two years later they get another score and have to come back to our school – that is not okay
- Special School Principal consulted in focus group

Disability is so varied it is extremely hard to categorise the individual ... there is potential for students who could significantly benefit from a specialist school setting but sit just outside the range to struggle and be lost within a mainstream setting ...
- Parents and carer survey response

If this process was a little more flexible more students would be in the setting that is the most appropriate for their needs - Specialist School Principal survey response

Contemporary Clinical Guidance

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, now in its 5th revised edition (DSM-5-TR), published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA), establishes the diagnostic criteria for intellectual disability. The APA has also published guidance that outlines how the conceptualisation of intellectual disability has developed over time and what this means for clinicians when formulating diagnoses.

The APA guidance stresses the importance of multi-domain assessments that must be considered holistically. As such, when formulating diagnoses clinicians will typically not ‘rule out’ individuals if they score above two standard deviations below the mean on any of the tests recommended by the DSM-5-TR. For this reason, a diagnosis of intellectual disability can be provided to an individual that has scored above 70 on a test of IQ or adaptive behaviour.

Furthermore, when specifying a ‘level’ of intellectual disability, in 2022 the DSM-5-TR moved away from using the IQ thresholds that are represented in the eligibility criteria for SDS schools. Instead, diagnosing clinicians are expected to specify the level of intellectual disability according to the individual’s adaptive behaviour.

Impact On Parents/Carers

The potential for children to score above the eligibility specific cut-offs is a source of anxiety for parents/carers in the lead-up to their children's assessments as part of the enrolment process.

Importantly, obtaining accurate and meaningful DSM-5-TR criteria test scores from children with disability and high needs can be a difficult process which is highly dependent on their behavioural needs and capabilities. As such, if children are having a ‘bad day’ when assessed their scores may not be an accurate reflection of their capabilities, and obtaining a complete assessment may not be possible.

For this same reason, these criteria may potentially incentivise parents/carers to encourage ‘poor’ performance on diagnostic tests, so that their children score below the relevant thresholds.

It should be noted that the eligibility criteria for autism schools also apply specific test score cut-offs to the assessment of adaptive behaviour and language. This element of those criteria is limited for the same reasons outlined on this page. See section 1 of this report (Victorian Current State) for further information.

1. American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Intellectual Disability. In Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.). https://www.psychiatry.org/File%20Library/Psychiatrists/Practice/DSM/APA_DSM-5-Intellectual-Disability.pdf

5. The eligibility criteria for autism schools require evidence of multidisciplinary diagnoses, which can place burden on some parents/carers

The eligibility criteria and evidence requirements for enrolment to an autism school require a multi-disciplinary diagnosis of autism for all applications. This is not aligned to current clinical guidelines put forward by Australia’s Autism Cooperative Research Centre (CRC), which recommends that single clinicians can provide diagnoses in cases where they have high diagnostic confidence. The current eligibility and evidence requirements for autism schools can place a significant burden and cost on parents/carers seeking enrolment to an autism school.

Current State

Currently, part of the criteria for autism schools require parents/carers to submit evidence of a multi-disciplinary diagnosis of autism, demonstrated through concurring reports from a psychologist, a speech pathologist, and a paediatrician or child psychiatrist. Parents/carers are also asked to submit a report from an occupational therapist ‘where appropriate’, but there is no further guidance on when this may be necessary.

The Problem

This requirement can place significant burden on parents/carers, as arranging evaluations from multiple clinicians takes a significant amount of time and effort; also incurring significant costs if parents/carers choose to consult private clinicians to expedite the process. The requirement that parents/carers must always provide evidence of multidisciplinary diagnostic evaluations of autism is also not fully aligned to the contemporary clinical guidance provided by the Autism Cooperative Research Centre (Autism CRC). The Autism CRC guidance outlines that it is appropriate for a single clinician to provide a diagnosis if they have high confidence in the diagnosis.

It should be noted that in addition to the requirement for a multi-disciplinary diagnosis, the eligibility criteria require students to have significant deficits in language skills. This element of the criteria is intended to ensure the criteria can effectively identify autistic students with high needs, whose support needs can be well-supported by the education programs of autism schools. This element of the criteria will still require a student to be assessed by a speech pathologist, regardless of whether their report is used as part of a multi-disciplinary diagnosis.

Contemporary Clinical Guidance

Australia’s Autism CRC was established by the Australian government in 2013 as a world-leading and independent source of evidence for best practice in relation to autism across the lifespan and spectrum. In 2018 the Autism CRC published a ‘National Guideline for the Assessment and Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorders in Australia’. This guide defines clinical best practice and sets diagnostic standards for autism.

One of the key recommendations outlined in this guide was a move away from a default requirement for multidisciplinary diagnoses of autism which was previously recommended best-practice. Under the new guidance, a single clinician (a selected medical practitioner or selected psychologist) is able to conduct a diagnostic evaluation in cases where they have high diagnostic confidence. In cases where they do not, it is recommended they seek consensus from other clinicians.

- 1. Whitehouse, A., Evans, K., Eapen, V., & Wray, J. (n.d.). *A National Guideline for the Assessment and Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorders in Australia: Summary and Recommendations*. Retrieved from [here](#).

Impact on Parents/Carers

Requiring parents/carers to obtain, collate, and submit evidence from multiple clinicians can sometimes impose an unnecessary burden on parents/carers.

As this requirement is not aligned to contemporary clinical practice, many parents/carers will only have reports from a psychologist (if the psychologist has high confidence in the diagnosis) and will therefore need to arrange additional consultations. As they are highly specialised, child psychiatrists and paediatricians are in high demand and in many cases parents/carers will need to wait for over a year to obtain an appointment with one.

This also introduces a clear risk of inequitable outcomes, as access to paediatricians and child psychiatrists is strongly influenced by a parents/carer’s location and financial means.

“ My son was diagnosed by a paediatrician and a speech therapist, this was ample evidence for Centrelink and NDIS... When it came to enrol at his current specialist school, we were advised that he needed a multidisciplinary diagnosis ... at a cost of \$1200, plus the current waitlist to see a psychologist at the time was 2 years... Only the education department require the multidisciplinary involving a psychologist to gain access.
 - Parents and carer survey response

39% of surveyed parents/carers reported that completing required assessments was a particularly difficult step in the enrolment process.

62% of surveyed specialist school or setting principals reported that completing any necessary assessments was the most difficult aspect of the school enrolment and application process for parents/carers.



6. Eligibility criteria for schools for students with physical disability are often interpreted as requiring evidence from paediatricians, which is difficult to obtain

The eligibility criteria and evidence requirements for enrolment to school for students with physical disability require a statement from a paediatrician or relevant medical specialist. However, there is a perception that only reports from paediatricians meet the evidence requirements for enrolment. It is understood that access to paediatricians is limited and costly. This may disadvantage parents/carers in regional and rural areas.

Current State

At present, parents/carers are required to submit the following documentation to support their applications to schools for students with physical disability:

- a statement detailing the disability or health impairment from a paediatrician or relevant medical specialist **AND**
- a statement detailing paramedical service requirements from a registered physiotherapist or occupational therapist.

The Problem

This requirement presents two key issues:

1. The wording of the criteria is relatively vague, and it is difficult for readers to be certain which medical specialists would be considered 'relevant'. As paediatricians are the only clinicians that are defined, many readers may assume that specialists with significantly less training and specialised knowledge such as a specialist clinical geneticist or a specialist endocrinologist are not considered to be comparatively 'relevant'. Consultations with principals indicate that this wording is typically interpreted as meaning that a report from a paediatrician *must* be submitted. Anecdotal reports from principals also suggest that the external verification service will sometimes return applications that do not include reports from a paediatrician and ask for them to be included. However, data from the verification service indicates that in the last two years 22 requests for further information on physical disability verifications occurred, where none of these specifically requested a paediatrician support. As outlined in the finding relating to autism schools, paediatricians are in high demand, and parents/carers often have to wait for more than a year to obtain an appointment with one, and the intention of this requirement is to seek input from the child's treating medical specialist, rather than a professional who is not familiar with the student.
2. An additional concern related to the eligibility criteria for schools for students with physical disability is that a student's learning needs may not be captured by specialists' diagnosis outlining the disability or health impairment experienced by the student.

Impact on Parents/Carers

The perceived requirement to obtain a report from a paediatrician makes it difficult for parents/carers to gather the necessary evidence for an enrolment application, as it takes a long time to obtain an appointment with a paediatrician.

Furthermore, this perception further disadvantages parents/carers in regional areas, for whom it is much more difficult, burdensome, and financially costly to access paediatricians.

As paediatricians can be accessed privately (at a cost), this also disadvantages any parents/carers who are unable to do so.

“ [...] Expecting medical professionals to comment on functional capacity is inappropriate, where is the educator's voice?
- Specialist School Principal survey response



7. The eligibility criteria for deaf schools and facilities is based on evidence from an audiogram, which provides limited information about educational needs

Current State

The eligibility criteria for deaf schools and facilities require students to have a permanent and bilateral sensorineural hearing loss of greater than 40dB across at least three frequencies, which is assessed using an audiogram, typically administered by an audiologist. Students must also require 'intervention or assistance' to communicate.

The Problem

There are a number of key problems with these criteria, as outlined below:

Hearing loss alone, as measured by an audiogram, does not give any indication of a student's educational needs outside of potential communication support that they may require. This means that it is difficult to assess the most appropriate educational setting for a student based on this information. For example, if a student utilises hearing aids that significantly improve their hearing and speech comprehension, they may be able to actively participate in a mainstream classroom setting without disadvantage or additional support needs, even though they are eligible for enrolment in a deaf school or facility.

Some students whose learning and wellbeing outcomes may be well-supported by deaf schools and facilities may fall outside of these criteria due to the nature of their hearing loss. For example, some students with conductive hearing loss (resulting from physical obstructions) rather than sensorineural hearing loss (or hearing loss resulting from damage to the auditory nerve or hair cells of the inner ear), or hearing loss which has primarily affected one ear, may benefit from the support provided by deaf schools and facilities. However, due to the nature of the criteria these students would be considered ineligible for enrolment in them.

“ The audiogram tells you detection, it doesn't tell you about discrimination, identification or comprehension. It doesn't show you how they [students] understand that sound.
- Speech Pathologist consulted in focus group

“ A trained professional needs to observe the student talking because an audiogram is not a good enough indicator of the individuals' communication ability.
- Teacher of the Deaf consulted in focus group

Impact on Parents/Carers

As the eligibility criteria for deaf schools and facilities involves the rigid application of specific score cut-offs, there is a clear risk of students whose learning and wellbeing outcomes would be well-supported by these schools falling just outside of them.

Furthermore, as an audiogram only provides information about hearing detection, these criteria do not provide for any consideration of a student's functional needs. This presents the risk that students whose learning and wellbeing outcomes may be better-supported in a mainstream school are enrolled in a deaf school or facility due to the nature of their hearing loss alone.

It is important to note that stakeholders in the Deaf community stress the importance of deaf and hard of hearing people having access to Auslan, communication, and the Deaf community. As such, eligibility criteria for deaf schools and facilities have an important role to play in ensuring this access is provided.



8. Eligibility criteria such as specific cut-offs on diagnostic assessment scores can vary between schools of the same type, risking inequitable student outcomes

Inconsistency in eligibility criteria used by specialist schools has been identified through a range of evidence. The variation in eligibility criteria between schools of the same disability category (e.g. autism schools), means that a student may not be eligible at their closest specialist school, but could be eligible for a specialist school of the same disability category further away. This variation and inconsistency in eligibility criteria not only creates confusion for parents/carers and students, but means that enrolment application outcomes for specialist schools of the same type can have quite different outcomes.

Current State

At present, some specialist schools maintain eligibility criteria that differ from the 'default' PSD (Program for Students with Disabilities)-based criteria for their school type. In most cases, these variations appear to be a result of the criteria iteratively being developed over time. One example is of an autism school requiring a diagnosis of both autism and intellectual disability in order for students to be eligible for their school, while other autism schools require an autism diagnosis only (as per the PSD criteria). A more common example is special developmental schools using specific IQ score 'cut-offs' in their eligibility criteria that differ from the PSD based eligibility criteria, where some use an IQ 'cut-off' score of 50 whereas others use 55. Through our consultations with principals, the only explanation offered for these differences was that they are a legacy of older approaches.

“ Our school’s cut off is 50, but I don’t know if it is written down anywhere by the Dept. Some schools say its 50, I was told ours was always 55 – **Special Development School (SDS) Principal consulted in focus group.** ”

Approximately 52% of principals surveyed through this review stated that their school did have additional eligibility criteria requirements to those in the 'default' PSD-based criteria for their school type.

These local variations in criteria may have developed in response to variations in local need. For example, some schools may have chosen to use higher or lower specific 'cut-offs' to allow more or fewer students to be deemed eligible, according to local demand and capacity. However, during our review we did not identify any instances of this occurring.

In 2021 the department conducted a review of enrolment criteria, policies and practices for specialist schools and settings. The report found that there was inconsistency and complexity in Victorian specialist school’s eligibility criteria and enrolment policies, which could create barriers to “accessing quality education for students with disability” in Victoria. The department has since implemented all of the report recommendations. However, this review heard many anecdotal reports of eligibility criteria varying between schools, and directly observed these variations in some cases.

The Problem

Variation in eligibility between schools presents a clear risk of parents/carers having inconsistent access and experiences based on their location, as their child may be eligible at one specialist school but ineligible at another of the same type. Furthermore, this variation adds additional complexity to the specialist school enrolment process, which is already often difficult for parents/carers to understand. Of the PASS specialist school principals surveyed, 89% agreed that differences in eligibility criteria between schools and regions can cause confusion for parents/carers.

Impact on Parents/Carers

Variations in eligibility criteria create a clear risk of inequitable experiences for parents/carers seeking a specialist school enrolment for their child. This means that one student’s educational experience can vary significantly from their peers due to this inconsistency across the state. Furthermore, variation in eligibility criteria of specialist schools of the same type adds to stress and confusion felt by parents/carers trying to navigate an already complex system.

Source: Department of Education and Training. (2021). (rep.). Specialist Enrolment Policy Review Findings Report (pp. 1–17).



Eligibility processes

Theme 3



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9. The process of determining eligibility can be complex, confusing, time-intensive, and stressful for parents/carers

Parents, carers and students may go through multiple steps to determine eligibility for their chosen specialist school. This process has layers of complexity and touch points, creating a time-consuming and burdensome experience. The process also places burden on school staff to support parents/carers to navigate the process. This process also appears to be inconsistent across the state, with some regions having more complex approaches than others.

Current State

Once parents/carers have identified a specialist school that they think would be appropriate for their child, they go through the application and enrolment process (noting that these are often school-based processes). There are several key steps to this process:

1. Most specialist schools require clinical reports to be submitted, requiring, in some cases, parents/carers to collate and arrange any additional assessments necessary. However, the department's contracted assessment service can conduct assessments of language and intellectual disability free-of-charge.
2. After parents/carers collect evidence and share it with their chosen school, the principal will then complete the application and submit it to the department for external verification.
3. The external verification service reviews the application and attaches evidence against the disability category eligibility criteria and either verifies or does not verify eligibility, or requests additional information. The verification process is intended to provide expert advice on whether students meet the eligibility criteria, and identify instances where the evidence is not of a high enough standard. Furthermore, by conducting this check, the verification process removes considerable administrative burden from principals.
4. Once the school is notified of the outcome of the disability category verification process according to disability category criteria, the principal can make a decision to enrol. However, in cases where a student's eligibility has not been verified and a principal is therefore unable to provide them with a standard enrolment, their family has the option to request a non-standard enrolment. Non-standard enrolments currently make up approximately 12% of current enrolments, and anecdotal reports from regional directors suggest that an affirmative outcome is provided in almost all cases. In all cases, an outcome is provided by the Regional Director's delegate, however in some instances the school principal makes a decision to enrol the student ahead of regional endorsement.

The Problem

This process presents a number of key challenges that affect many stakeholders involved with it:

- Arranging assessments with clinicians can take a considerable amount of time and effort. Some parents/carers choose to consult with private clinicians for the sake of expediency, at a financial cost to themselves.
- Completing applications can take a significant amount of time for principals, especially when they have to coach parents/carers through the process.
- Verification can be simple and efficient (within 3 days) when all required information is provided. This can take longer when the required evidence is missing, or where reports do not contain the necessary information, and the verification service is required to seek this additional information from the school, which then has to liaise with the family to get the missing information.
- Inconsistency in decision-making responsibility for non-standard enrolments causes confusion for both parents/carers, and school staff. In some cases, this step also appears to introduce additional time and complexity to the enrolment process, leading to stress and frustration for parents/carers.

Impact On Parents/Carers

The complex and administratively burdensome nature of the specialist school application process can result in it taking several months to complete. This causes significant stress and frustration for parents/carers.

This is often compounded by the stress caused by students struggling in a mainstream school during the application process.

Inconsistencies in the eligibility decision-making process between schools and regions also pose the risk of introducing inequitable outcomes.

The end-to-end enrolment process took more than 3 months for 27% of parents/carers surveyed, with 6% reporting it taking over 9 months.

27% of surveyed parents/carers reported it was difficult to understand the eligibility criteria and processes when first applying to their chosen specialist school or setting.

39% of surveyed parents/carers reported that completing required assessments was a particularly difficult step in the enrolment process.

10. The potential for eligibility reviews to result in a student’s enrolment being revoked often causes stress for students and parents/carers

Eligibility reviews occur periodically for eligible students enrolled in specialist schools, and are intended to confirm that the student’s needs have not changed to the extent that they are no longer eligible for the school they are enrolled in. Each year only 2.5%* of students (27 of 1053 students in 2021) are found ineligible upon review, however the prospect of this occurring, and the perceived impacts it would have, can cause significant stress for many parents/carers. It was also reported that reviews create a significant administrative burden on schools to coordinate and process the eligibility reviews.

Current State

The frequency of reviews differs according to the funding model used by the school and the student’s enrolment type. At schools under the program for students with disabilities (PSD) funding model, reviews happen at the transition between year 6 and 7, except for cases where a student receives funding at PSD level 5 or 6, in which case their eligibility does not require review. At schools under the disability inclusion (DI) funding model, reviews may be conducted more frequently according to the student’s progress, however students must still have a review conducted in year 6 or age equivalent, except where their eligibility has been verified within the previous two years. An important distinction between the DI and PSD models is that under DI, reviews are designed to be for funding eligibility only. Students enrolled on short-term or non-standard enrolments are required to have their eligibility reviewed every one or two years, at the discretion of the school or region. See Appendix 1 on the eligibility review process.

“Over the years we have sent kids back to [mainstream] schools but it really doesn’t work that well [...]. What we saw [following ineligible determination from a review] was like child abuse, sending kids settled in our school and then upturning their life, and it was cruel” – Dual mode principal from focus group

The Problem

Although the outcomes of eligibility reviews are not intended to be ‘binding’, and students are not technically required to leave their school if found ineligible, it appears that this is frequently the way they are interpreted by both schools and parents/carers. This causes stress for many parents/carers and may also result in students being made to transition to mainstream schools when they are not technically required to.

“ It’s hard enough having a child with a disability let alone having to keep being reminded of this with repetitive testing and reviews for enrolment. My child has an intellectual disability, that’s not going to change, so why have I had to go through the process THREE times in 10 years.

- Parents and carer survey response

“ I work with children at the other end who have found the year 6/7 review traumatic and seen suicidal tendencies in these children.

- Leading expert in neurodevelopmental disorders in Victoria

Impact on Parents/carers

Eligibility reviews often cause a significant amount of stress for students and parents/carers, which is disproportionate to their perceived and actual outcomes. Although only approximately 2.5% of students are found ineligible each year (of which none are technically required to leave their school), the perception that this may occur is enough to create a genuine fear that students will need to transition to mainstream schooling or another specialist school type, which may be a difficult process, especially as some students, parents/carers may have had negative experiences there previously.

In addition to the stress caused by the perceived potential consequences of reviews, the process is often burdensome for many parents/carers. As reviews essentially follow the same process as initial enrolment applications, it can take a significant amount of time to arrange, conduct, and organise the necessary assessments and evidence. These issues are outlined in more detail in the second theme of findings in this report.

90% of surveyed principals agreed or strongly agreed that eligibility reviews are a stressful and burdensome experience for parents/carers and students.

Data collection

Theme 4



The better the question. The better the answer.
The better the world works.

11. Data collection relating to specialist schools is relatively fragmented, limiting visibility of important aspects of the system

Data relating to specialist schools is collected, stored, and analysed in different ways between regions, and some important data is either not visible to the central department or not collected at all. Due to the constraints in data collection, the department is not fully able to monitor or report on the effectiveness of the current eligibility criteria of specialist schools. There is an indirect impact on parents/carers where possible interventions to improve student and parent/carer experience of the specialist school system may be constrained by a lack of appropriate data availability.

Data relating to specialist schools are collected and visible at different levels

Centrally held data

- ▶ Enrolment numbers for specialist schools
- ▶ PSD/DI funding levels provided to students at specialist and mainstream schools
- ▶ Outcomes of eligibility and disability category verification applications.

Regionally held data

- ▶ Outcomes of NSE applications (held inconsistently across regions).

The following data and information are not consistently visible to central and regional offices

- NSE and standard enrolments. For example, the regional disability coordinator (RDC) survey showed that Owens Murray, North-East Melbourne and Central Highlands regions do not have data or lists on standard enrolment requests.
- Presence of waitlists and the number of students on them
- School capacity
- School-specific enrolment policies.

The department has no or limited data on the following

- ▶ Average duration of application and enrolment process
- ▶ Number of times parents/carers are dissuaded from submitting an enrolment application by schools
- ▶ Reasons for NSE enrolments
- ▶ Frequency of ineligible determinations that are appealed.

“ School’s tracking of these non standard enrolments is often poor.[...] There is no portal for [R]DCs to be able to track NSEs and when they need to be reviewed [...] [R]DCs do not have oversight of this [waitlists] for all schools – we do not have year level capacity nor whole school capacity.

RDC survey respondent from Southern Eastern Victoria Region

Non-standard enrolments as a case study:

The current state of data collected relating to non-standard enrolments makes it difficult for the department to understand the nature of non-standard enrolments across the state. The data used in this report were an aggregation of confirmed (0.4%)* and assumed (11.6%)** NSEs, which highlights the lack of detailed visibility over these enrolments. In addition to the raw number of non-standard enrolments, there is no data that can help the department understand why they have (or have not) been granted. As non-standard enrolments are both a valuable opportunity and a key source of stress and burden for many parents/carers (as outlined in finding 9 of this report), this lack of visibility is a significant risk for the department.

Limitations to the data currently visible to the department pose a number of challenges and risks

- ▶ Without clear visibility over all elements of the specialist school system in Victoria, the department is limited in its ability to make evidence-based strategic decisions to influence, guide, and improve the system.
- ▶ Without an accurate and evidence-based understanding of the specialist school system in Victoria, it will be difficult for the department to effectively develop, deploy, track, and evaluate interventions.
- ▶ Similar or identical data being collected, stored, and analysed in multiple ways risks wasting departmental time and resources.

*Confirmed standard or non-standard enrolments are those for which an official enrolment verification process has occurred that confirms that the student's enrolment is either standard or non-standard
**Assumed non-standard enrolments have been determined where a student did not have a specialist school enrolment verification completed as of Feb 2023 and: the student is not funded under PSD or DI; the student is PSD funded but their disability category does not match the school's specialisation; the student is funded under Disability Inclusion (Tier 3 or Disability Inclusion Transition Support) with unknown or not matching disability category.




Recommendations

Eleven recommendations have been developed to increase choice, improve family experiences and department capability to administer the system

Detailed recommendations, including risk and implementation considerations, have been developed to support changes to the specialist school enrolment system that will improve choice, the experience of parents, carers and students, the efficiency of the system's operations, and the gathering and use of data to inform future policy reform.


Recommendations



Improve Access to Information

1.

Improve access to quality information about school options for students with disability



Update Eligibility Criteria

2.

Retain the use of eligibility criteria for enrolment in specialist schools.

4.

Develop a decision-making framework to guide consideration of functional needs for students found ineligible according to diagnostically-focused criteria.

6.

Align the diagnostic elements of eligibility criteria for autism schools to contemporary clinical guidelines.

8.

Ensure consistent eligibility criteria are used by all schools of the same type as appropriate.

3.


Retain the use of diagnostically-focused eligibility criteria for enrolment in specialist schools, while updating and improving them.

5.

Use a diagnosis of intellectual disability as the threshold for eligibility to schools for students with intellectual disability, rather than specific score cut-offs.

7.

Clarify the types of professionals that can submit evidence for applications to schools for students with physical disability.




Update Processes

9.

Define and apply a standardised approach to enrolling students in specialist schools.

10.

Adjust the eligibility review process to focus on identifying the educational setting that is best-placed to support each student.



Improve Data Collection

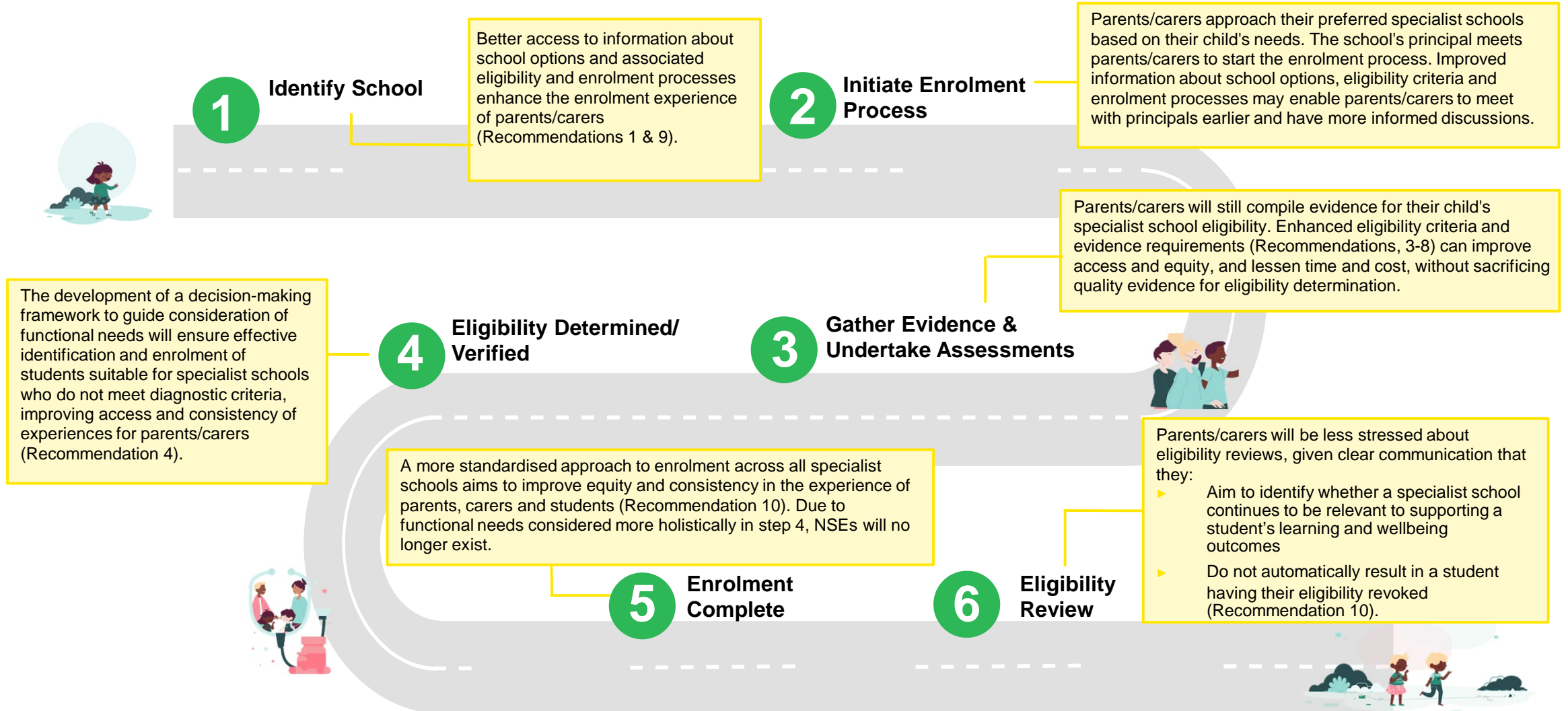
11.


Improve the collection of data relating to specialist school enrolment.



The experience of parents/carers with the current process will improve significantly if the report recommendations are implemented

The recommendations will improve the experience of students, parents/carers; increase choice and enhance the efficiency and efficacy of the eligibility and enrolment processes.





Improve Access to Information

Theme 1



The better the question. The better the answer.
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Recommendation 1: Improve access to quality information about school options for students with disability

At present it is very difficult for many parents/carers to access high-quality, consistent, and accurate information about the school options available to their children with disability, in both mainstream and specialist school contexts.

Current State

Current State

Information about school options for students with disability and high needs is currently stored across a number of departmental websites, and there is no single source of information that contains everything parents/carers need.

Crucially, across these resources, there is no clear and easy-to-understand overview of the end-to-end specialist school enrolment process that can help parents/carers understand what to expect.

What's Working Well

Parents/carers are able to easily identify schools in their area using the 'Find my School' website. Parents/carers are often able to obtain information about school options from teachers, early childhood educators, clinicians, and community groups.

Current Challenge

- ▶ While parents/carers can often obtain information from teachers, early childhood educators, clinicians, and community groups, the quality and accuracy of this advice may vary.
- ▶ It is difficult for parents/carers to access high-quality, consistent, easy-to-understand, and factually correct information about school options for their child with disability and high needs, and how to access them.
- ▶ This makes it difficult for parents/carers to identify the school settings that would be most suited to their child's needs, the support available to them, and how to start the enrolment process for specialist schools.
- ▶ All of this contributes to stress and frustration for parents/carers and can delay students getting access to specialist educational support.
- ▶ Although high-quality online resources will provide many parents/carers with the guidance they need, it is likely that some parents/carers would struggle to make use of them.

Recommended Future State

Recommendation

- ▶ Develop a website that provides parents/carers with clear, accurate information about school options and associated eligibility and enrolment processes. This should include:
 - ▶ Ensuring web content is relevant to key stakeholders, including parents/carers, school staff, clinicians and early childhood educators
 - ▶ Exploring how to enhance the usability of the 'Find my schools website', such as through including specialist school type
 - ▶ Investigating how to make the website easy to find, such as through search engine optimisation (SEO) principles that promote relevant department content in search engines and cross-referencing and linking relevant webpages.
- ▶ Identify and support the right people for parents to contact for advice regarding school options for students with disability, making sure they are easy for parents to locate and speak to.

Rationale

Providing parents/carers with an easy-to-use source of high-quality information will help them understand different school settings, consider which they think will best suit their child, and how to apply to them.

Stakeholders that often support parents/carers will also have access to high-quality information, enabling them to give accurate and consistent guidance.

Develop a website that provides parents/carers with clear, accurate information about school options and associated eligibility and enrolment processes.

Impact on Families

This recommendation would boost efficiency by helping parents/carers to quickly understand the options available to them, and the processes involved with accessing them. This would improve their enrolment experience and reduce the risk of inadvertently seeking to enrol their child in a school that is not suited to their child's needs.

Recommendation 1: Improve access to quality information about school options for students with disability

Improving the accessibility of quality information about the school options for students with disability and associated eligibility and enrolment processes will require making sure that this information can be accessed through a number of channels while remaining consistent.

Implementation Considerations

- ▶ The department’s website can be updated to host a ‘front door’, ensuring that it is effectively integrated into existing resources (such as Find my School) and easy to find.
- ▶ The ‘front door’ will need to be carefully integrated with existing resources (including external ones such as community organisation websites) to make sure that parents/carers are able to access it using means they are already familiar with.
- ▶ A modest amount of ongoing investment could be required to ensure the website and resources it links to stay up-to-date with future changes. More detail about the potential implementation costs of this recommendation is included in the implementation section of this report.
- ▶ A communications and awareness strategy will boost uptake of the new resource and should include specific messaging and content for existing community stakeholders that provide advice to parents/carers about school options and associated eligibility and enrolment processes. This would include tailored communications and information to parents/carers and stakeholders, using platforms and channels that are familiar to the intended audience and appropriate for communicating the given information, including in regard to specialist school eligibility and enrolment reforms.
- ▶ The individuals and roles best equipped to provide support and guidance to parents/carers may differ between schools and regions, especially in cases where these responsibilities are not currently fulfilled by anyone.

Associated risks	Mitigations
Keeping the website updated may be time and resource-intensive	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ A detailed content maintenance plan should be developed alongside the website development so that resourcing can be adequately planned.
Some parents/carers will likely struggle to make use of the website due to language or capability barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Content on the website should be developed in clear, easy-to-understand language, user-tested with the community, and made available in alternative language and easy-English options.▶ By including information for community stakeholders that frequently support parents/carers, the website will empower them to better support those that struggle to make use of it.

Recommended Next Steps

- 1 Work with parents/carers to understand the key information about school options that they need access to.
- 2 Develop content that provides this information in a clear and easy-to-understand manner, incorporating search engine optimisation principles.
- 3 Test and validate content with a range of parents/carers and other stakeholders, such as teachers, early-childhood educators, and clinicians.
- 4 Develop the website, exploring how to make the website easy to find and usable.
- 5 Develop a communications and awareness strategy to ensure effective uptake from relevant stakeholders, including early education settings, clinicians, and disability organisations.
- 6 Launch communications and awareness campaign and distribute physical collateral.
- 7 Identify those responsible for providing guidance to parents/carers about school options for their children and ensure they are aware of the updated information resources and are provided with the support they require.

Update Eligibility Criteria

Theme 2



The better the question. The better the answer.
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Recommendation 2: Retain the use of eligibility criteria for enrolment in specialist schools

Although some elements of the current-state eligibility criteria create challenges for parents/carers, the use of criteria is an invaluable tool for identifying the students whose learning and wellbeing outcomes can be well-supported by specialist schools. As such, we recommend that the use of eligibility criteria be retained, however we also recommend that they be updated as per recommendations 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9.

Current State

Current State

At present, criteria are used to determine which students may be eligible to enrol into specialist schools. The criteria are specific to the various types of specialist schools, enabling each type to provide a specialised education program and environment for students with disability and high needs to achieve learning, wellbeing, and social growth. This is aligned with the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* (VIC) (ETRA) stipulation that each specialist school in Victoria must have specific enrolment eligibility criteria that are approved by the Minister for Education or their delegate.

What's Working Well

Although there are some opportunities to improve these criteria (which are addressed in this report), they provide an invaluable tool for providing clarity when identifying students whose needs can be well-supported by specialist schools. In addition to helping identify the settings most aligned to a student's educational needs, these criteria have a secondary benefit of managing demand for specialist schools.

Current Challenge

- ▶ This review was asked to consider whether specialist schools should have eligibility criteria. Our view is that criteria should be retained for specialist schools.
- ▶ If criteria were to be removed, while parental choice could be increased, there would be a significant risk of students whose needs would be better catered to in a mainstream school being enrolled in specialist schools.
- ▶ The removal of criteria would also pose a risk of increasing the demand placed on specialist schools, which would require consideration of the impacts on infrastructure and workforce, with significant cost implications.

Recommended Future State

Recommendation

- ▶ Retain the use of eligibility criteria for specialist schools, however consider updating the criteria as per recommendations 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9*.

Rationale

- ▶ Retaining criteria will ensure that schools are provided with a system for identifying which students are most appropriate for enrolment in them
- ▶ Removing criteria would risk causing an increase in the demand placed on specialist schools, and reduce their capacity to provide targeted, specialised programs
- ▶ Retaining criteria will support schools to maintain their specialisations in catering to the needs of different students with disability and high needs
- ▶ Similarly, this would be consistent with government policy governing other specialism schools in Victoria, such as the criteria in place for 'Selective Entry' schools
- ▶ Selective Entry Schools are recognised as providing a specialist environment that enable highly able students to more fully achieve extended intellectual and social growth. Similarly, specialist schools can provide a similarly tailored environment to support students with disability and high needs.

Impact on Parents/Carers

Maintaining specialist school eligibility criteria will enable parents/carers to understand which educational settings are designed to cater to students with needs similar to their children's and support them to make well-informed choices. The use of eligibility criteria will also ensure schools are not exposed to too much demand, allowing them to appropriately cater to students with disability and high needs. However, the nature of the criteria may result in potentially avoidable and significant costs, time, effort, stress, and burden being placed on parents/carers, and the creation of inequitable experiences and outcomes. As such, we recommend that eligibility criteria are also updated as per recommendation 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9.

*Several options were considered in the development of this recommendation, which are outlined on slide 63.

Recommendation 2: Retain the use of eligibility criteria for enrolment in specialist schools

The following options were considered as part of this recommendation:

Options	Remove eligibility criteria entirely	Replace eligibility criteria with priority order of enrolment	Retain eligibility criteria
Description	Specialist schools would no longer have eligibility criteria. If demand exceeded supply, enrolments would likely be managed through a priority order of enrolment policy and / or local eligibility criteria.	Set thresholds for eligibility are replaced by school-level priority of enrolment policies. Applicants would be accepted in the order they are received, or from highest to lowest need until all places are filled.	Each specialist school has eligibility criteria and considerations based on their specialisation, which students must meet in order to be eligible for enrolment. It is recommended that this is comprised of diagnostically-based criteria, but supplemented by an option to consider functional needs, as outlined in recommendation 4.
Benefits	This option would increase parental choice by allowing any parent/carer to send their child to a specialist school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ This option would allow schools to prioritise their available places for the students that could benefit most from their specialised programs ▶ This option would also allow schools to more easily offer parents/carers choice by removing the need for a non-standard enrolment process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Provides schools and parents/carers with clarity about the purpose and scope of each school's purpose and intended cohort. ▶ Enables schools to make transparent and consistent decisions. ▶ Enables students with needs that are relevant to the school's specialisation to be identified and enrolled. ▶ Protects the prioritisation of places for students most in need and most suited to schools' specialist education programs.
Risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The cohort of students targeted by specialist schools would change from those that meet each school's eligibility criteria to those whose parents/carers would like them to be enrolled in a specialist school. ▶ Enrolments of students with behavioural issues and without disability may increase. ▶ The potential inclusion of students without disability and high or complex needs may dilute the specialisation of each school. This would change the nature and purpose of specialist schools, which is out of scope for the review. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Specialist schools receive enrolment applications at various times throughout the year given the timing of associated assessments. ▶ Schools may fill all places, and then lack the capacity to cater for transfers in later years (noting approximately half of specialist school enrolments occur after Prep)*. ▶ If a school adopts a "first-in" approach, students most in need may miss out. ▶ This may result in increased uncertainty for some parents/carers due to the variability of the student cohort each year. ▶ Ranking of need would require development of appropriate and transparent methodology. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Some assessments required to meet diagnostically-focused criteria must be sourced and funded by parents/carers. ▶ Accessing some assessments may take a considerable amount of time due to long public waitlists, which may drive some parents/carers to choose to pay significant costs for private assessments, leading to inequitable access ▶ There may be opportunities to explore associated mitigation strategies, such the provision of additional supports for autism assessments and / or investigating circumstances in which a multi-disciplinary approach to autism assessments may not be required (as per recommendation 6) ▶ Diagnostically-focused eligibility criteria cannot provide a holistic understanding of a student's educational needs, and the clinicians that provide evidence are not equipped to make informed judgements about school options for students with disability.
Recommendation	Not recommended	Not recommended	Recommended

*Based on 2024 specialist school enrolment data, approximately 50 - 60% of students were of Prep age equivalent when they enrolled in a Victorian government specialist school for the first time, i.e. their previous school was not another Victorian government specialist school. The remainder of the students enrolled in a Victorian government specialist school for the first time when they were in an age equivalent year level other than prep. In addition, 95% of those enrolled in specialist schools in grade 6 stayed in specialist school post grade 6.

Recommendation 3: Retain the use of diagnostically-focused eligibility criteria for enrolment in specialist schools, while updating and improving them

Although there are a number of challenges posed by the diagnostically-focused components of the current-state eligibility criteria (as addressed by later recommendations), they are familiar, provide clarity and consistency, and are closely linked to the intended purpose of specialist schools, while also offering a relatively efficient means to determine eligibility. Retaining these criteria, in the short term, will allow for stability and consistency whilst more contemporary criteria are developed and piloted.

Current State

Current State

Specialist schools currently use eligibility criteria based on the criteria used by clinicians to diagnose the conditions that each type of school caters to. Currently, **88 per cent** of specialist school students are enrolled based on these diagnostic criteria alone.

What's Working Well

Diagnostically-focused criteria, if communicated effectively, can be relatively simple and easy to understand. They also offer a relatively streamlined entry pathway into specialist schools for students who already have evidence of diagnostic assessments and meet the eligibility criteria. Specialist schools currently cater to particular categories of disability. For some categories of disability, diagnostic criteria are important and helpful.

Current Challenge

- ▶ Clinically based diagnostic criteria are not designed to inform educational placement decisions.
- ▶ Parents and carers may experience challenges accessing assessments to establish if their child meets eligibility in a timely manner.
- ▶ At times school principals find interpreting clinical assessments to make an eligibility determination challenging.

Recommended Future State

Recommendation

Retain diagnostic elements of eligibility criteria for specialist schools, however consider updating them as per recommendations 5, 6, 7, and 8.

Rationale

- ▶ This option would also allow schools to more easily offer parents/carers clarity by removing the need for a non-standard enrolment process
- ▶ Diagnostically-focused criteria offer a relatively streamlined entry pathway into specialist schools for those students who already have evidence of diagnostic assessments and meet the eligibility criteria
- ▶ With updates as recommended in this report, diagnostically-focused criteria can provide a tested and validated approach to determining eligibility. Maintaining this approach can provide consistent experiences to families while other approaches to determining eligibility (such as through the consideration of functional need) are tested and validated for the future.

Impact on Parents/Carers

Retaining (while updating and improving) the diagnostic elements of specialist school eligibility criteria will ensure that there continues to be a relatively streamlined pathway into specialist schools for students that have existing evidence of diagnostic assessments, or can obtain one.

Recommendation 4: Develop a decision-making framework to guide consideration of functional needs for students found ineligible according to diagnostically-focused criteria

The existing specialist school eligibility criteria and determination process is diagnostic in nature. In some instances, this process does not provide a holistic understanding of a student's educational needs. Developing a framework that supports decision-makers to consider the functional needs of students who just fall short of meeting the (revised) diagnostically-focused eligibility criteria will enable the needs of all students with disability and high needs to be appropriately considered.

Current State

📍 Current State

The eligibility criteria currently used by specialist schools are largely diagnostic in nature and focus on identifying whether a student fits the disability 'category' of their chosen school. Students that are found ineligible according to these diagnostically-focused criteria can apply for entry to a specialist school via a non-standard enrolment, which requires regional approval.

What's Working Well

The current diagnostic criteria provide clear thresholds for determining eligibility, offering clarity and certainty to parents/carers, and supporting the eligibility determination process. The diagnostic elements of eligibility criteria also ensure that specialist school students have disability and high support needs, and provide expedited pathways for those who have already received relevant diagnoses. Those ineligible according to these criteria can seek enrolment through non-standard enrolments.

Current Challenge

- Students found ineligible for enrolment due to falling outside of the eligibility criteria are often accepted into their chosen school through a non-standard enrolment. This process essentially considers the functional needs of students, but is frequently time-consuming, burdensome, inconsistently implemented, and stressful for many stakeholders involved.
- Approximately 12% of specialist school students are enrolled on a non-standard enrolment because they don't meet the diagnostically-focused criteria, which cannot alone provide a holistic understanding of these students' educational needs.
- At present, there is not a collectively well-understood mechanism for considering the functional needs of students for the purpose of determining whether they should be eligible for enrolment in a specialist school. As such, the current decision-making process underlying non-standard enrolments is not standardised and is frequently inconsistently applied.
- The eligibility criteria for deaf schools and facilities is based on evidence from an audiogram, which provides limited information about educational needs.

“ There needs to be some degree of flexibility as opposed to black and white criteria. Each case needs to be assessed by looking at all the needs of the child as a whole

Parent and carer survey response

Recommended Future State

Recommendation

- Replace the current non-standard enrolment process with a decision-making framework to guide consideration of functional needs for students found ineligible according to diagnostically-focused criteria by specialist school principals.
- Develop a decision-making framework for specialist school principals to consider whether a student's functional needs are sufficient to make them eligible for enrolment in a specialist school.
- Specialist school principals to automatically apply this framework in cases where a student is found ineligible according to the diagnostically-focused criteria.
- It is recommended that this framework is aligned with the domains in the Disability Inclusion Profiles (based on the WHO's International classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health) that are used to determine a student's educational needs and adjustments.
- Offer students found eligible through this process standard, rather than non-standard, enrolments.
- Require decisions made through this process to be approved by regional SWE-EDs to ensure quality and consistency, but assess whether these reviews are required after 3 years.



Rationale

- This approach will replace the current non-standard enrolment process, adding legitimacy to these enrolments and improving the consistency of experiences for parents/carers.
- This will provide an avenue for students that fall outside of the diagnostically-focused eligibility criteria to have their needs considered without having to go through a potentially burdensome secondary enrolment application process.
- This will also allow for greater consistency in the consideration of functional need, with a clear set of guidelines for decision-makers and the opportunity to collect data about enrolment decisions based on functional need to inform quality assurance.

Impact on Families

Having an alternative means of determining eligibility will mean that students who are found ineligible according to the diagnostically-focused criteria can still have their needs considered. By replacing the non-standard enrolment process, this will provide a streamlined experience for students that are not eligible according to diagnostically-focused criteria, and remove negative connotations associated with their enrolments being 'non-standard'.

Recommendation 4: Develop a decision-making framework to guide consideration of functional needs for students found ineligible according to diagnostically-focused criteria

The incorporation of a functional needs decision-making framework into eligibility determinations for specialist schools will require a considered and gradual approach.

Implementation Considerations

- Consideration of functional need should not be onerous and should only be applied when the diagnostically-focused criteria are not met.
- Those applying the decision-making framework (recommended to be principals and ED SWEDs) will need to be supported to do so, such as through the provision of guidance, case studies and/or information sessions, as appropriate.
- To ensure the decision-making framework is consistently and equitably applied, it will be important to establish a quality control mechanism. It is recommended that ED SWEDs review and approve decisions made using this framework by specialist school principals for at least the first 3 years of its use. After this time, the necessity of these approvals should be reviewed to assess whether they add value.
- Currently amongst the same types of specialist schools, there is variation in the extent to which they support various types of functional needs. Consideration would need to be given to whether over time the same type of specialist school should support the same functional needs for consistency.
- The process for determining level of functional need will need to be simple and complementary to other processes, enabling local decisions to be made through Student Support Groups (SSGs). For example, for students who enroll in a specialist school following prep, their previous Disability Inclusion Profiles would provide valuable insights about their functional needs.
- The implementation of the decision-making framework will need to be monitored to:
 - ensure it is being applied consistently
 - ascertain whether those applying it require any further support
 - identify if and how its application is affecting specialist school enrolment numbers.

Recommended Next Steps

- 1 Use Disability Inclusion Profiles completed by the existing student population to develop an understanding of the functional needs catered to by each specialist school.
- 2 Work with clinical and educational professionals to identify the high functional needs in an education setting that would benefit from the level of specialist support provided by a specialist school.
- 3 Develop a functional needs decision-making framework in partnership with key stakeholders that will be involved in its application.
- 4 Support principals and ED SWEDs to effectively apply the decision-making framework, such as through providing guidance, case studies and/or information sessions (as appropriate).
- 5 Develop and apply a monitoring system to review data* to ascertain how the decision-making framework is being applied, monitor the impact of the application of the framework and identify any associated barriers and support needs.
- 6 Regularly review and refine the framework and guidance.
- 7 After 3 years, review whether ED SWED approval of principals' decisions on the basis of functional needs is still required, and if not revise specialist school enrolment policy to allow for this.

Associated risks	Mitigations
Incorporating consideration of functional needs into eligibility determination processes may result in more students being eligible for specialist schools and thereby increase demand on the system.	Functional needs considerations can be developed through evaluation of the current specialist school student population enrolled on standard and non-standard enrolments to ensure they effectively capture the intended cohort.
Functional needs considerations may take a significant amount of time to evaluate.	Evaluating functional needs can leverage existing SSG processes and should not be onerous, and should only be applied when diagnostically-focused criteria are not met.
A functional needs-based approach may take a significant amount of time and resources to develop, validate, and roll-out.	Existing resources such as the Disability Inclusion Profile process can be leveraged to streamline development, and small improvements such as guidelines for non-standard enrolments can be implemented in the meantime.

Recommendation 4: Develop a decision-making framework to guide consideration of functional needs for students found ineligible according to diagnostically-focused criteria

We recommend that a number of key parameters inform the design of the decision-making framework to ensure it can fulfill its intended purpose, as outlined below.

Purpose

The framework should be intended to support decision-makers (with the approval of decisions by ED SWEDs for at least 3 years)* to consider the functional needs of students and determine whether these needs make them eligible for specialist schooling. Importantly, the process of applying this framework should be intended to replace the current non-standard enrolment process. We recommend that any enrolments offered to students found eligible through the application of the functional needs decision-making framework are offered *standard*, rather than *non-standard* enrolments.

* As outlined in recommendation 9, we suggest these decision-makers be principals.

Intended Users

The framework is intended to be applied by educational experts to determine eligibility according to functional need, as distinct from clinical experts interpreting diagnostic information. Although educational experts such as teachers and principals will be best-placed to interpret educational needs and how they can be addressed, some capability uplift will likely be needed to ensure they can apply the framework consistently.

Development

As the functional needs and intended cohort catered to by each school type vary significantly, the way that the framework is applied, or potentially the framework itself, will also need to vary between school types.

We recommend that the framework is developed with consideration of the existing Disability Inclusion Profiles, and in particular that it aligns to the domains assessed in these profiles as much as possible. Not only will this allow for process efficiencies for students that have already completed a profile (and those that will complete one in the future), but this will also ensure the significant effort that went into validating these profiles can be used to inform the decision-making framework as well.

Additionally, this process should be informed by the World Health Organisation's International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) (as the Disability Inclusion Profiles were) to ensure it is aligned to contemporary best practice.

Domains and Considerations

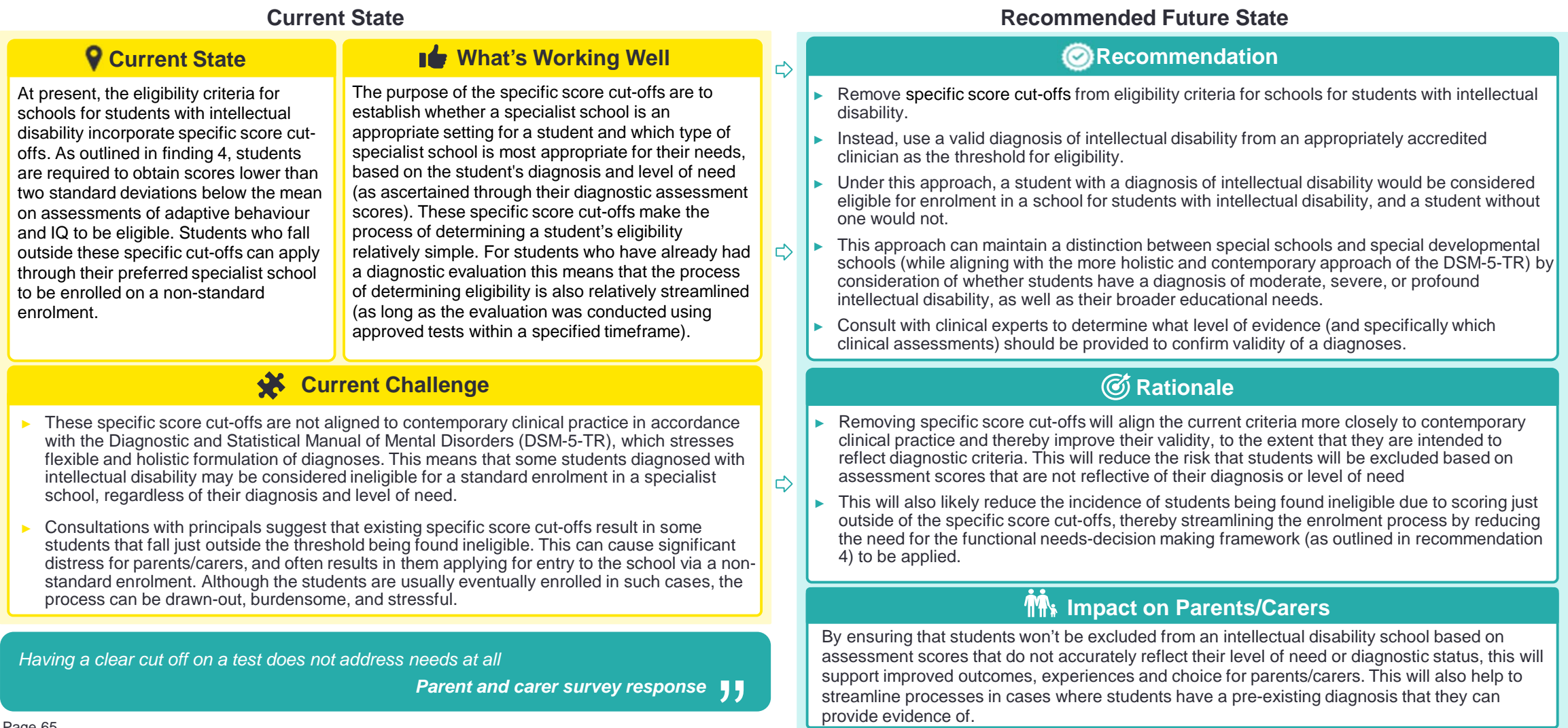
It is recommended that the decision-making framework be aligned to the domains outlined within the existing Disability Inclusion Profiles. Doing so will ensure that information already gathered to inform these profiles can also be used to inform the decision-making framework, and vice-versa. As the Disability Inclusion Profiles can take a significant amount of work to complete, it is important to note that this alignment should only amount to the decision-making framework being able to *supplement* the profile, and vice-versa. This will improve the efficiency of these processes and reduce the risk of duplication and unnecessary burden.

The framework should ensure consideration can be given to a wide range of factors that can influence a student's functional needs. A number of examples have been provided below:

- ▶ the student's ability to successfully engage in social interactions with their peers
- ▶ the student's ability to effectively communicate with others
- ▶ the student's ability to effectively self-manage their own hygiene, eating, and drinking needs, and the amount of support that they require to do so
- ▶ the requirements of any individual health care plans that the student has
- ▶ the student's ability to successfully engage with learning in a classroom environment, in both mainstream schools and specialist settings
- ▶ the student's level of independence in physical mobility, and their ability to use the motor skills necessary to engage with learning in classroom settings
- ▶ the adjustments that the student requires to effectively engage with learning
- ▶ the student's educational history and experiences in other educational settings, including trauma
- ▶ the strategies that are necessary to ensure a student's safety, as well as the safety of those around them
- ▶ the capacity of the students' family or carers to support their education.

Recommendation 5: Use a diagnosis of intellectual disability as the threshold for eligibility to schools for students with intellectual disability, rather than specific score cut-offs

In the current eligibility criteria for schools for students with intellectual disability, specific score cut-offs are required for assessments of adaptive behaviour and IQ to identify the target cohort of students. Removing these specific score cut-offs and instead determining eligibility according to whether or not a student has been diagnosed with an intellectual disability by an appropriately accredited clinician in accordance with professional guidelines will allow for a more streamlined and equitable process, and will reduce the need for additional processes to be applied.



Recommendation 5: Use a diagnosis of intellectual disability as the threshold for eligibility for schools for students with intellectual disability, rather than specific score cut-offs

Ensuring that removal of current specific test score cut-offs from eligibility criteria for schools for students with intellectual disability aligns to contemporary best-practice and will require working with both clinical and educational professionals. This process should also include consideration of the tools and evidence that are used to support applications for enrolment to specialist schools.

Implementation Considerations

- ▶ Consulting with clinical and educational professionals will be crucial to ensure criteria are accurately aligned to best practice for making decisions about educational placement, and informed by contemporary clinical practice.
- ▶ As part of aligning diagnostic elements of eligibility criteria to contemporary clinical practice, the diagnostic tools used and the diagnostic information which is to be evaluated as part of the eligibility determination process should be considered and aligned with the contemporary diagnostic practice set out in the current version of the DSM, insofar as is possible.
- ▶ The alignment of eligibility criteria to diagnostic practice may have an impact on the processes applied by the department's contracted assessment services. For example, when evaluating whether students meet the criteria for the intellectual disability category, the contracted assessment service use the adaptive behaviour component of that evaluation as a 'screener' and will not conduct a complete assessment for students that do not pass the threshold on that test. The contracted assessment service will struggle to apply this 'screener' approach if specific test score cut-offs are removed, as students will no longer be automatically ineligible after scoring above the adaptive behaviour test threshold. As such, we recommend that the department consider lifting the adaptive behaviour threshold that students must score under to qualify for an IQ assessment (e.g. from 70 to 80). Clinical experts should be consulted to determine what the appropriate threshold would be.

Associated risks	Mitigations
This recommendation may increase the number of students that are eligible for schools for students with intellectual disability, thereby increasing demand placed on the system	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ This recommendation does not intentionally create a net increase in the number of students eligible for schools for students with intellectual disability. While any changes resulting from this recommendation may increase the number of students that are eligible, it is anticipated that they would capture the cohort of students currently enrolled in schools for students with intellectual disability on a non standard enrolment. The risk posed by this recommendation should be evaluated by reviewing how many students are currently found ineligible due to being just outside the specific score cut-off thresholds.▶ The department has existing mechanisms to manage school demand, which we estimate would cater for, and monitor, any additional demand created by this recommendation so that the department can take further demand management actions if required.

Recommended Next Steps

- 1 Clarify and clearly outline the intended cohort of each type of specialist school.
- 2 Consult with clinical and educational professionals to align eligibility criteria more closely with contemporary best-practice where appropriate.
- 3 Work with clinical and educational professionals to update professional guidelines for professionals undertaking assessments to inform specialist school eligibility processes.
- 4 Work with the contracted assessment service to update assessment processes for any school types for which they can provide assessments (noting it currently only conducts ID assessments, but may be able to conduct others).
- 5 Communicate the updated criteria to all relevant stakeholders and ensure they are reflected on any centralised information sources, such as the website outlined in recommendation 1.



Recommendation 6: Align the diagnostic elements of eligibility criteria for autism schools to contemporary clinical guidelines

The current eligibility criteria for autism schools feature diagnostic elements that retain a number of features that do not reflect current practice, such as evaluating diagnostic assessments with specific test scores. These specific cut-offs have been ascertained through the process of an autism assessment, however they have not been adapted to align to changes in diagnostic approaches.

Current State

📍 Current State

At present, the eligibility criteria for autism schools incorporate specific score cut-offs. As outlined in finding 4, students are required to demonstrate a composite score of two standard deviations or more below the mean on assessments of adaptive behaviour and language skills to be eligible for these schools. Students who fall just outside of these specific cut-offs and are found ineligible for enrolment can apply to be considered for a non-standard enrolment.

👍 What's Working Well

The purpose of the specific cut-offs is to establish whether an autism school is an appropriate setting for a student, based on their diagnosis and level of need. This approach makes it relatively simple to determine a student's eligibility. For students who have already had a diagnostic evaluation this also means that determining eligibility can be relatively streamlined, so long as the evaluation was conducted using approved tests and within a specified timeframe.

Current Challenge

- ▶ Language skill assessment scores are used in the eligibility determination process as a proxy to determine level of need. However current diagnostic formulation for autism is broader and considers sensory and behavioural needs. As such, some students that may benefit from the specialised supports offered by autism schools may be ineligible for them as a result of their language capabilities.
- ▶ Consultations with principals suggest that existing criteria can cause significant distress for parents/carers, and often results in them seeking private assessments, or applying for entry to the school via a non-standard enrolment. Although the students are almost always eventually enrolled in such cases, the process of a non-standard enrolment can be drawn-out, burdensome, and stressful.

Recommended Future State

Recommendation

Align diagnostic elements of the eligibility criteria for autism schools to contemporary clinical guidelines outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5-TR), and by the Australian Autism Cooperative Research Centre (CRC). Doing so will require working with clinical experts, and should incorporate the following considerations:

1. The criteria must continue to identify the target student cohort for autism schools, which is autistic students with high needs.
2. The extent to which eligibility criteria should align to clinical diagnostic practice should be clarified.
3. Depending on the extent to which eligibility criteria should be aligned to diagnostic practice, they will need to be updated in the future to maintain this alignment, as diagnostic practices will continue to evolve.
4. The concerns relating to score specific 'cut-offs' identified in this report.
5. The evidence required to determine eligibility (including clinical assessments) should be based on contemporary clinical guidelines and allow streamlined processes.
6. Any updates needed to manage the risk of increasing the cohort of eligible students.

Rationale

- ▶ This will ensure that any elements of eligibility criteria that are linked to diagnostic information are consistent with contemporary practice and reflect up-to-date understanding of disability
- ▶ This will likely reduce the incidence of students being found ineligible due to scoring just outside of the specific score cut-offs, and thereby reduce the need for the application of a functional needs decision-making framework as outlined in recommendation 4
- ▶ It will also ensure that the evidence required to support diagnostic elements of eligibility criteria are as streamlined as possible and do not exceed or conflict with contemporary diagnostic practice.

Impact on Families

Aligning diagnostic elements of eligibility criteria to contemporary diagnostic practice, will allow parents/carers to make more-informed decisions and reduce the risk of students who could benefit from specialist schooling being excluded.

Recommendation 6: Align the diagnostic elements of eligibility criteria for autism schools to contemporary clinical guidelines

Ensuring that eligibility criteria for autism schools are aligned to contemporary best-practice will require working with both clinical and educational professionals. This process should also include consideration of the tools and evidence that are used to support applications for enrolment to specialist schools.

Implementation Considerations

- ▶ Consideration should be given to expanding the Students with Disability Assessment Service to support some or all types of assessments required to establish eligibility in autism schools, to reduce the burden on schools and parents/carers.
- ▶ A potential first step in this process could be reviewing the required multidisciplinary autism assessment for eligibility in autism schools (where doing so aligns with contemporary clinical guidelines and where diagnosing clinicians have high confidence in the diagnosis).
- ▶ Working with clinical and educational professionals will be crucial to ensuring criteria are accurately aligned to best practice for making decisions about educational placement and informed by contemporary clinical practice.
- ▶ To ensure that eligibility criteria are still able to effectively identify students with a high level of need, consideration could be given to whether autism diagnosis levels (i.e. level 1, 2 or 3) are more appropriate to incorporate into eligibility criteria for autism schools than the existing approach of language and adaptive behaviour scores.
- ▶ As part of aligning diagnostic elements of eligibility criteria to contemporary clinical practice, the diagnostic tools used and the diagnostic information which is to be evaluated as part of the eligibility determination process should be considered and aligned with the contemporary diagnostic practice set out in the current version of the DSM.
- ▶ For example, the department may wish to clarify the purpose of language assessments for autism schools and consider whether these are required, or if a consideration of functional need may be a more appropriate means to determine the level of need.
- ▶ As clinical guidelines and diagnostic practice will continue to evolve over time, it will be necessary to regularly review these eligibility criteria in partnership with clinical experts to ensure they are appropriately aligned to contemporary practice. To ensure accountability, it may be useful to mandate that this process occurs at set time periods, such as every 5 years.

Recommended Next Steps

1

Work with clinical and educational professionals to align eligibility criteria more closely with contemporary clinical guidelines where appropriate.

2

Consider the removal of the need for multidisciplinary diagnoses (where appropriate) from the eligibility criteria for autism schools.

3

Work with clinical and educational professionals to update professional guidelines for professionals undertaking assessments to inform eligibility processes for autism schools.

4

If applicable, work with any contracted assessment services to update the processes for any assessments they conduct as part of the eligibility determination process for autism schools.

5

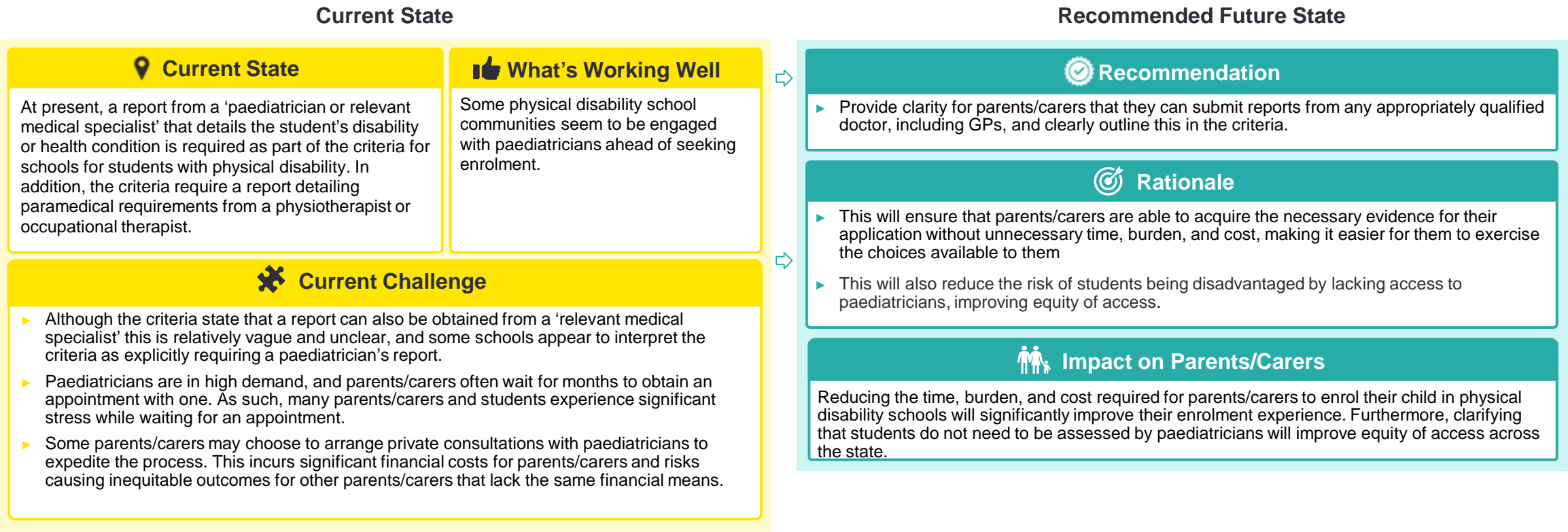
Communicate the updated criteria to all relevant stakeholders and ensure they are reflected on any centralised information sources.

Associated risks	Mitigations
This recommendation may increase the number of students that are eligible for autism schools, thereby increasing demand placed on the system	<div><div>▶ This recommendation does not intentionally create a net increase in the number of students eligible for autism schools. While any changes resulting from this recommendation may increase the number of students that are eligible, it is anticipated that they would capture the cohort of students currently enrolled in autism schools on non standard enrolments. The risk posed by this recommendation should be evaluated by reviewing how many students are currently found ineligible due to being just outside the specific score cut-off thresholds.</div><div>▶ The department has existing mechanisms to manage school demand, which we estimate would cater for, and monitor, any additional demand created by this recommendation so that the department can take further demand management actions if required.</div></div>



Recommendation 7: Clarify the types of professionals that can submit evidence for applications to schools for students with physical disability

The current criteria for schools for students with physical disability are often misinterpreted as requiring parents/carers to submit a report from a paediatrician. Specifying the professionals from whom reports will be accepted, where practical, will clarify this component of the criteria.



Recommendation 7: Clarify the types of professionals that can submit evidence for applications to schools for students with physical disability

Working with clinical experts ahead of implementing this recommendation would be useful to clarify the relevant types of professionals who can submit evidence as part of the eligibility determination process for a physical disability school.

Implementation Considerations

- ▶ Clear guidance about which professionals are able to provide reports should be provided to all stakeholders that are required to interpret the eligibility criteria, including parents/carers, teachers, and clinicians.
- ▶ It should be noted that the criteria also require reports from physiotherapists or occupational therapists that detail paramedical requirements. The department should consider whether these reports may be sufficient evidence alone, without the need for additional inputs from other clinicians.

Associated risks	Mitigations
Removing the perceived need for reports from paediatricians may increase the number of students that are eligible for schools for students with physical disability, thereby increasing demand on the system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ The potential increase in demand should be evaluated prior to any changes being implemented.▶ The significance of an increase in demand will need to be evaluated, as this could provide useful insights about the extent to which mainstream schools are adequately catering to students with physical disability.▶ The department has existing mechanisms to manage school demand, which we estimate would cater for, and monitor, any additional demand created by this recommendation so that the department can take further demand management actions if required.
Enabling less-specialised clinicians such as GPs to provide evidence may risk somewhat lowering the threshold of evidence, making more students eligible and increasing demand on the system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Revised department guidelines for clinicians will enable clinicians to understand the desired threshold of evidence.▶ The verification service will still be able to scrutinise the evidence provided by clinicians and determine whether it is sufficient.

Recommended Next Steps

- 1 Work with clinical experts to clarify the relevant types of professionals who can submit evidence as part of the eligibility determination process for a physical disability school.
- 2 Work with clinicians to determine the level of evidence necessary to demonstrate a valid diagnosis, and which clinicians can provide this.
- 3 Communicate the updated guidance on the types of professional that can submit evidence for applications to schools for students with physical disability, to all relevant stakeholders and ensure they are reflected on any centralised information sources.

Recommendation 8: Ensure consistent eligibility criteria are used by all schools of the same type as appropriate

At present, there is some variability in the eligibility criteria applied by individual specialist schools of the same type. Clarity, community confidence and reliability would be improved if the same criteria was used by all schools of the same type.

Current State

Current State

Currently, there is variability in the eligibility criteria applied by individual specialist schools. For example, some special developmental schools use an IQ score 'cut-off' of 55, whereas others set it at 50. In most cases, it appears that these local variations are a legacy of schools developing their own criteria at different times.

According to the department enrolment policy, specialist schools must have a local enrolment policy that lists their enrolment eligibility criteria and must publish it in a visible and publicly accessible location, for example, on their school website or other public platform. The department has published an enrolment policy 'template' that schools are encouraged to use to outline their eligibility criteria for parents/carers. However, this template is not mandated, and has not yet made criteria consistent.

Current Challenge

- ▶ Inconsistent eligibility criteria between schools of the same type causes confusion for parents/carers and school staff.
- ▶ It also poses a clear risk of inequitable outcomes for students, as it means that their eligibility for a specialist school is influenced by their location.

What's Working Well

School-specific criteria enable schools to maintain specialisations based on a more specific cohort than the general criteria provide for.

Some schools may adapt their criteria to respond to local specificities in demand, allowing them to target their support to the students they deem most in-need.

Recommended Future State

Recommendation

- ▶ Mandate that schools align the eligibility criteria in their enrolment policies to the template relevant to their school type provided by the department and communicate these criteria via their school website. This would effectively make the eligibility criteria the same for all specialist schools of the same type, regardless of what those criteria are.
- ▶ As eligibility criteria are updated, ensure all schools are informed of the changes and require them to update the criteria in their enrolment policies accordingly.

Rationale

- ▶ Making eligibility criteria consistent within each specialist school type will make it significantly easier for all stakeholders to understand the criteria at individual schools.
- ▶ This will improve the experience of parents/carers when enrolling in specialist schools, while also reducing the risk of inefficiencies resulting from confusion or misunderstandings.
- ▶ This will also reduce the risk of inequitable outcomes resulting from different schools of the same type accepting different students from different cohorts.

Impact on Families

Ensuring that eligibility criteria are consistent across all schools of the same type will make it significantly easier for parents/carers to understand which school types are relevant to their children, and whether or not they might be eligible. This will also reduce the risk of parents/carers experiencing inequitable outcomes resulting from different schools applying different criteria.



Clarity and consistency of enrolment processes and eligibility across schools, regions and central office (are important)

Principal Survey Response

Recommendation 8: Ensure consistent eligibility criteria are used by all schools of the same type as appropriate

To implement this recommendation, a detailed audit of school-based criteria would need to be conducted and an analysis of these criteria (relative to the system-wide eligibility criteria) would need to be conducted ahead of engaging with each school to ensure consistency in eligibility criteria.

Implementation Considerations

- ▶ An alternative approach to ensuring consistent eligibility criteria may be to remove criteria from school-level enrolment policies altogether, and instead require each school to refer to the centralised set of criteria relevant to their school type. This would make it significantly easier to ensure that all schools use the same up-to-date criteria and would remove the need for individually auditing them. This approach would also be aligned to the management of eligibility criteria for mainstream schools.
- ▶ If some schools have criteria that are more inclusive than the new standard, some of their existing students may be considered ineligible. It will be important to ensure that these students are not reviewed against the new criteria for the duration of their schooling, so that they do not lose their eligibility.
- ▶ Some schools may offer additional programs (such as early intervention and other extra-curricular supports) that are relevant to students that fall outside of the eligibility criteria. Considerations will need to be made for cases where harmonising criteria would put these programs at risk.
- ▶ It would likely be most efficient to update the criteria and integrate functional needs into it prior to making it consistent across the state, to reduce the number of updates that schools are required to make to their criteria.

Associated risks	Mitigations
Where the current criteria used by schools are more restrictive than the criteria to be harmonised, this may increase demand.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ The potential increase in demand should be evaluated prior to the changes being implemented.▶ Potential increases in demand should be evaluated through the design process so that the impact on individual schools and the system more broadly can be evaluated.▶ If the potential increase in demand is limited to a small number of schools, these schools can plan to meet any increases accordingly. If the increase may be more significant and across the system, this recommendation may need to be reconsidered.▶ Importantly, any increase in demand resulting from the criteria being updated may be at least in-part reflective of the level of need in the population, which could provide direction for further investigations.

Recommended Next Steps

- 1 Establish a governance structure to oversee and approve eligibility criteria for each type of specialist school.
- 2 Align on the set of criteria for each type of specialist school, where appropriate.
- 3 Work with schools to determine potential unintended consequences and mitigate potential impacts on demand in cases where local criteria differ.
- 4 In consultation with specialist schools, develop and publish a clear timeline for them to align their criteria, with guidance on how to do so.
- 5 Develop an approach to regularly conducting audits, using existing compliance review processes if appropriate, to confirm that schools have implemented the consistent criteria and kept them up-to-date.



Update Processes








Theme 3



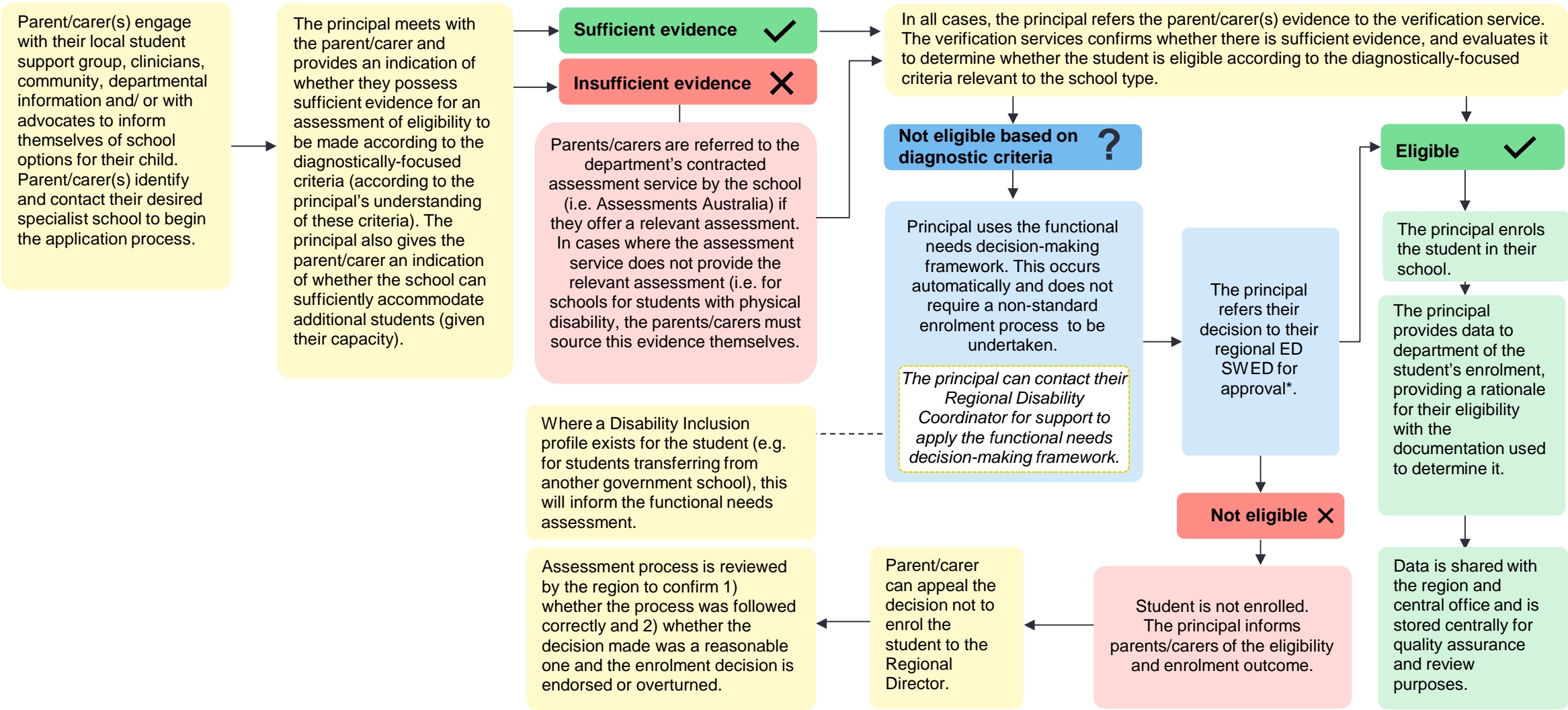
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Recommendation 9: Define and apply a standardised approach to enrolling students in specialist schools

At present, the process used to enrol students varies between regions, which causes some confusion and risks creating inequitable outcomes. A standardised approach to enrolling students should be developed and adopted across all regions, which would allow principals to enrol students upon receiving verification of eligibility.

Current State		Recommended Future State	
<div><div> Current State</div><div>Regional staff have responsibility to approve specialist school enrolment decisions (as outlined in the Enrolment in Specialist Schools and Other Specialist Settings policy). However, in practice, specialist school eligibility determinations can vary between regions, especially in the case of non-standard enrolments. Anecdotal reports from principals also suggests that there may be variability in the enrolment decision-making process for standard enrolments as well, with enrolment decisions either being made at the school level (in most instances) or at the regional level (in some instances).</div></div>	<div><div> What's Working Well</div><div>Different processes may have been developed to cater to variabilities in local capacity, capabilities, and needs. In some instances, principals may prefer to receive more guidance and advice from their regional office, especially in cases where they lack the clinical expertise necessary to interpret the diagnostic information required by the criteria.</div></div>	<div><div> Recommendation</div><div><ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Develop a standardised approach and guidance for schools on enrolling students, and support all regions to adopt it.▶ Empower principals to enrol students on the basis of diagnostically-focused criteria (and notify their regional office afterwards), noting that regional approval is recommended for enrolments made on the basis of the functional needs decision-making framework for at least its first 3 years of operation.▶ Determine and clarify the circumstances in which principals would be required to submit a student's application and evidence for verification (as currently occurs for all applications) and ensure a mechanism is in place to provide principals with support when making complex decisions.▶ Ensure that an appeals process is retained, providing parents/carers with the opportunity to submit an appeal in cases where they believe due process has not been followed.</div></div>	<div><div> Rationale</div><div><ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Ensuring that enrolment processes are standardised will reduce confusion for all stakeholders▶ This will also offer opportunities to ensure the most efficient approaches are adopted across the state to improve the experiences of parents/carers and will reduce the risk of inequitable outcomes for students resulting from different processes being used in different regions.</div></div>
<div><div> Current Challenge</div><div><ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Inconsistencies between schools and regions in the processes used to determine eligibility may result in inequitable outcomes and experiences for parents/carers based on their location. These inconsistencies also result in confusion for all stakeholders involved, including parents/carers and school staff, and can cause process inefficiencies.▶ For example, in some regions principals enrol students as soon as they receive confirmation of their eligibility, whereas in others they first refer to their region for approval. Significant variability is also seen in the way that non-standard enrolments are considered and offered to students, and although we recommend that this process be replaced by the functional needs decision-making framework, the same risks to consistency will remain.</div></div>	<div><div> Specialist school principal survey respondent</div><div>[Specialist school enrolment is] an extensive process with many elements and a range of assessments required. The whole process needs to be simplified</div></div>	<div><div> Impact on Parents/Carers</div><div>Ensuring enrolment processes are clear and consistent will reduce the chance of inequitable experiences and outcomes for parents/carers based on their location. This will also make it easier for parents/carers to understand the process that they will need to go through, improving the quality of their enrolment experience.</div></div>	

Recommendation 9: Define and apply a standardised approach to enrolling students in specialist schools



* After 3 years, review whether ED SWED approval of principals' decisions on the basis of functional needs is still required, and if not revise specialist school enrolment policy to allow for this.

Recommendation 9: Define and apply a standardised approach to enrolling students in specialist schools

Clarifying the ultimate decision-maker for enrolling students into specialist schools and monitoring adherence to the agreed process will be crucial to successful implementation of this recommendation.

Implementation Considerations

- ▶ Much of the current inconsistency in processes may result from misunderstandings and miscommunication at various levels, and therefore any changes will need to be clearly communicated to all relevant stakeholders to ensure they are impactful.
- ▶ It will be crucial to ensure that principals can continue to access support and guidance from their regional office where required. It is understood that this guidance can be particularly important in cases of complex disability and uncommon diagnostic presentations, as principals are not expected to have the clinical expertise required to interpret this information.
- ▶ Improved data collection (as outlined in recommendation 11) will be crucial to ensuring that regional and central offices have visibility over the enrolment process and outcomes.
- ▶ Importantly, the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) mandates that all schools have an appeals process in place, and at present, the non-standard enrolment process is essentially considered to be an ‘appeals’ process for students that have been found ineligible according to the diagnostically-focused criteria. As our recommendations include the removal of non-standard enrolments (as the functional needs decision-making process replacing them will result in standard enrolments), it is recommended that a new appeals process is developed. Specifically, that this appeals process is focused on determining whether the eligibility determination process has been appropriately followed, rather than offering alternative means for consideration of eligibility.

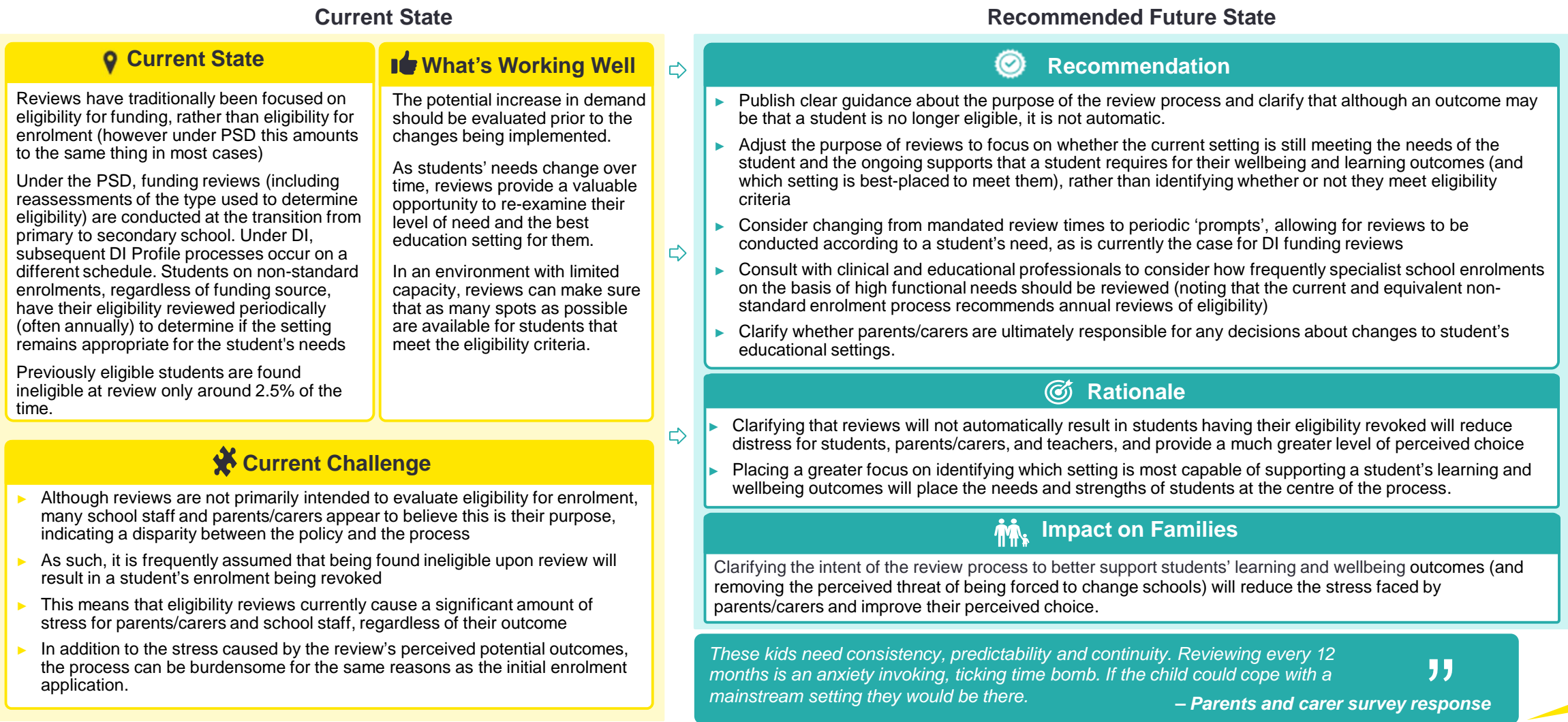
Recommended Next Steps

- 1 Establish a governance structure to oversee and approve specialist school enrolment processes.
- 2 Develop a set of guiding principles for the development of the standardised approach to enrolment.
- 3 Align on the desired approach to determining specialist school eligibility (with a proposed approach recommended on the previous page), noting that proposed changes to authorise specialist school principals to approve enrolments (based on meeting diagnostic criteria) would require a change to the specialist school enrolment policy.
- 4 Test and validate this approach with schools and regions to ensure it is fit-for-purpose and easy to understand.
- 5 Disseminate guidance to all schools and regions, and offer information sessions and check-ins as part of the change approach.
- 6 Develop an approach to monitor and assure that enrolment processes are being consistently implemented by all specialist schools and regions.

Associated risks	Mitigations
Some principals may value the advice and guidance that they receive from their regional office through the process and feel concerned that this change will result in them losing access to that.	▶ It should be made clear to all stakeholders involved in the process that regional offices should provide principals with advice and guidance upon request.

Recommendation 10: Adjust the eligibility review process to focus on identifying the educational setting that is best-placed to support each student

While this is not the express intention, reviews of eligibility at key transition points are often perceived by parents/carers and schools to have binding outcomes that may force a student to transition from a specialist school to a mainstream one. Clarifying the intention and outcomes of the eligibility review process and adjusting it to focus on identifying which educational setting is best-placed to support a student's learning and wellbeing outcomes will reduce parent/carer distress and directly impact on parenting choice.



Recommendation 10: Adjust the eligibility review process to focus on identifying the educational setting that is best-placed to support each student

Re-purposing the review process, aligning it to the functional needs assessment and Disability Inclusion Profile, and clarifying its purpose to principals, parents/carers will be important in the successful implementation of this recommendation.

Implementation Considerations

- ▶ Re-purposing the review process to focus on identifying the ongoing supports that students require for their learning and wellbeing outcomes, and the settings that are best-placed to provide them, will require adaptations to the current process. In particular, it will require active discussion and cooperation between mainstream schools and specialist settings that the student would be eligible to attend. Furthermore, it may be useful to have 'impartial' participants who can moderate discussions between parents/carers and schools and help to align the capabilities of each setting to the identified need of students. Existing roles such as regional disability coordinators or student support services may be well-placed to deliver this function.
- ▶ As mainstream schools continue to improve their capacity to provide inclusive education to all students, this purpose will become increasingly important. Rather than only responding to any changes in a student's needs and capabilities, this purpose will ensure that changing capabilities within the schooling system can also be considered when identifying which setting is best-placed to support students.
- ▶ The nature of the review process will be largely dependent on the nature of eligibility criteria. If the eligibility criteria have a greater focus on functional need as outlined in recommendation 4, the process of gathering evidence may be less onerous for parents, but possibly more onerous for schools.
- ▶ Clear communications and guidance targeted at both school staff and parents/carers will be central to the implementation of this recommendation, and the website outlined in recommendation 1 would be impactful in enabling this. Furthermore, in cases where it is found a student may have better learning and wellbeing outcomes by transferring to a new setting, clear guidance held on the proposed website may help to make the process less daunting.
- ▶ For SSGs to effectively inform the review process, clear guidance outlining 'best practice' may need to be published for them.

Recommended Next Steps

- 1 Confirm the department's position towards the purpose of reviews.
- 2 Determine whether the current review process is capable of fulfilling this purpose, and develop any amendments where necessary.
- 3 Better align the specialist school eligibility review process to subsequent DI Profile processes.
- 4 Identify appropriate timing of reviews, including with consideration for those enrolled on the basis of high functional needs (who have not met the diagnostic elements of eligibility criteria), in consultation with clinical and educational professionals.
- 5 Develop and distribute a clear and comprehensive purpose statement that outlines the potential outcome of reviews.
- 6 Develop and distribute clear guidance about the intended review process.
- 7 Closely monitor the outcomes of review processes to evaluate the extent to which they're fulfilling their intended purpose.

Associated risks	Mitigations
Ensuring that enrolments are not automatically revoked for students found ineligible (as may currently be occurring in practice) may increase demand.	▶ Currently only 2.5% of students on standard enrolments are found to be ineligible upon review and many of them likely receive a non-standard enrolment, so the potential increase in enrolments following ineligible review outcomes is likely minimal.
Students whose support needs are not well-suited to specialist schools over the longer term may remain in specialist schools, which risks them missing out on a broader education and taking up the school's capacity for students with higher needs. This is a particular risk for students who are enrolled via the functional needs decision-making framework, as they may not have ongoing high educational support needs and therefore may not be well-suited to specialist schools over the longer term.	▶ Students who are enrolled on the basis of high functional needs, must have high functional needs that are the result of their disability (in so far as it is possible to tell). Therefore, students with high functional needs and no diagnosis of disability, would not be eligible for specialist school enrolment. Expert advice should be sought to identify appropriate timing of reviews, including with consideration for those enrolled on the basis of high functional needs.
If recommendations are not binding, parents/carers may choose to ignore them.	▶ The review output should include a clear and compelling outline of which setting has been deemed as most likely to support a student to thrive, and why a potential change would be worthwhile.



Improve data collection

Theme 4




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Recommendation 11: Improve the collection of data relating to specialist school enrolment

Collection of data relating to specialist school enrolment is currently fragmented, making it difficult for the department to develop an accurate understanding of the state of the system. Improving the collection of data by consolidating data that are currently collected by regions and identifying opportunities to develop additional mechanisms for collecting consistent data from across the state will better support policy and system reform.

Current State


**Current State**

Collection of data relating to specialist school enrolments and associated processes is currently fragmented, with different regions collecting different data, and doing so in different ways. Little or no data is collected about non-standard enrolments, disability category reviews (at DI schools), and the experiences of students and parents/carers when enrolling in or attending specialist schools.

**What's Working Well**


The following data are centrally collected:

- ▶ The number of enrolments at specialist schools.
- ▶ Data relating to PSD and DI funding provided to students at both specialist and mainstream schools.
- ▶ Outcomes of eligibility and disability category verification applications.

**Current Challenge**


- ▶ Without high-quality data, it is difficult for the department to develop a comprehensive and accurate understanding of the impacts that specialist school eligibility criteria and processes have on enrolment outcomes and the experiences of students and parents.
- ▶ It is also difficult for the department to use the data available to them to identify any potential problems, risks, barriers, and opportunities for improvement in the criteria and processes.

Recommended Future State


**Recommendation**

Several key opportunities to improve collection of data have been identified, as outlined below:

- ▶ Extend the planned digital enrolment portal to specialist schools, allowing parents/carers to initiate the enrolment process online if they wish
- ▶ Identify opportunities for regions to consolidate data that they already collect in a central repository and align their data-gathering mechanisms for consistency
- ▶ Establish individual identifiers for students early in the enrolment process that can be used to link them with other data and track their progress and outcomes
- ▶ Consider additional data that may be useful as outlined on the following pages.

**Rationale**

- ▶ Higher-quality data will allow the department to better understand the experiences of parents/carers and students applying to enrol in specialist schools, and identify any key issues with the criteria and processes. This will allow the department to make decisions that maximise the choice available to parents/carers and improve their experiences
- ▶ This will also allow the department to measure and evaluate the impact of any changes to specialist school eligibility criteria and processes.

**Impact on Families**

Improvements in data gathering and analysis will ensure the department can appropriately monitor and refine system settings and supports to continuously improve family experience and choice. Specifically, understanding if, when, and why parents/carers make choices not to enrol their children in specialist schools after initially seeking to do so, would provide the department with a more detailed understanding of potential unmet demand for specialist schools.

Recommendation 11: Improve the collection of data relating to specialist school enrolment

Careful consideration of the collection of new data, as well as the integration of these data into existing data sets and analytical models will be important in building capacity of the policy and system staff to translate these data into policy insight.

Implementation Considerations

- ▶ Improving the collection of data across the state will require a significant level of cooperation and buy-in between all regions and the central department.
- ▶ The digital enrolment portal will need to be rolled out, tested, and validated across mainstream schools as currently planned before integrating specialist school enrolment into it. As this process is already occurring, it would likely be difficult and disruptive to adapt the portal to this new purpose before that is completed. It will also likely need to be adapted to be fit-for-purpose for the specialist school enrolment process.
- ▶ The utility of individual identifiers for students may be limited by the number of existing data systems that they can be successfully linked with.
- ▶ To be able to effectively measure and evaluate the impacts of any recommendations outlined in this review, improved data collection should be implemented as a priority.

Associated risks	Mitigations
Any additional manual data-entry may slow down the eligibility determination and enrolment process, and place extra demand on an already stretched workforce.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Opportunities to automate data collection as much as possible should be identified and utilised.
Collecting more data will carry inherent risks relating to privacy and confidentiality.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Legal and human rights experts should be closely involved in the development and implementation of any additional data collection mechanisms.

Recommended Next Steps

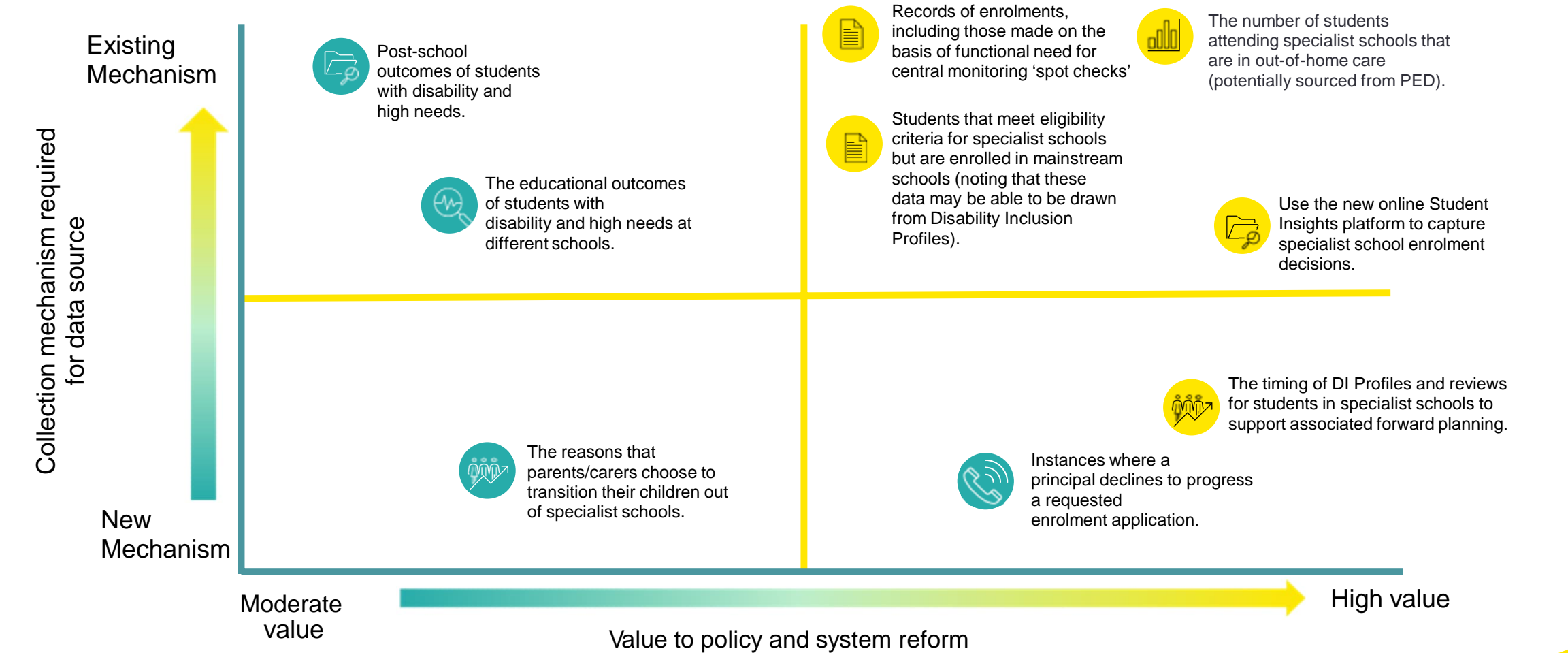
- 1 Identify data that is currently collected by each region and conduct an analysis of how this data is/could be used to monitor and support enrolment decisions and processes.
- 2 Consult with experts to determine how considerations of privacy and human rights can be incorporated into the implementation process.
- 3 Develop mechanisms for centrally storing relevant data collected at the regional level.
- 4 Identify any needs for regions to change the way that they collect data for the purpose of consistency and support them to do so.
- 5 Identify opportunities for individual identifiers to be established for students, and how they can be linked into existing data.
- 6 Work with the team deploying the digital enrolment portal to expand relevant parts of it to specialist schools.



Additional supporting data for specialist school eligibility criteria and enrolment processes

In addition to those outlined on the previous page, there are a number of additional data sets that would provide valuable insights about specialist school eligibility criteria and enrolment processes. These suggested data sets have been grouped according to whether there is an existing mechanism to collect the data (as a proxy for cost and effort) and the value of that data to policy and system decision-making. Some of these considerations are out-of-scope for this review but have been raised by key stakeholders during the consultation process. The department may wish to consider the cost and value of gathering and analysing these data sets in the future.

 In-scope for this review  Out-of-scope for this review



A large yellow trapezoidal frame with a thick border. The top edge is slanted upwards from left to right. The bottom edge is horizontal and composed of three small yellow squares followed by a solid yellow line.

Additional Considerations



The better the question. The better the answer.
The better the world works.

Additional considerations

Consultations conducted as part of this review revealed a wide range of issues and opportunities that were considered out-of-scope. Although we have not developed detailed findings and recommendations for these considerations, we have outlined several key points below that the department may wish to examine further in the future.



Review the nature of Schools for the Deaf

The eligibility criteria for deaf schools and facilities require students to have a permanent and bilateral sensorineural hearing loss of greater than 40dB across at least three frequencies and require 'intervention or assistance' to communicate.

This criteria is relatively simplistic and does not offer great insight into the educational needs and capabilities of students, and may result in students who would benefit from the supports of these schools being unable to access them.

Some teachers, clinicians, and parents/carers have also expressed a view that enrolment in deaf schools and facilities should also be made available to students that primarily speak Auslan at home, as this may be the language in which they are most comfortable and capable of learning in.



Review links with alternative settings

Victoria offers alternative settings and flexible learning options for some students that are not well-catered to in mainstream schools. These accommodations are not specifically designed for students with disability, however there is inevitably some overlap between the cohort that alternative settings and specialist schools are designed to cater to.

Some stakeholders have raised concerns that some students who struggle in mainstream schools may not be eligible for specialist schools or alternative settings and find themselves in a 'grey area'. This may impact the learning and wellbeing outcomes of these students and result in school avoidance behaviours.



Recommendation

Conduct a review to explore and clarify the intended purpose of deaf schools and facilities, with specific attention to the cohort of students that they are intended to support. In particular, it is recommended that this review considers whether students falling into the categories outlined below should be considered eligible for deaf schools and facilities:

- ▶ students with conductive rather than sensorineural hearing loss
- ▶ students with unilateral rather than bilateral hearing loss
- ▶ students without hearing impairment that primarily communicate in Auslan at home.



Recommendation

Consider the findings of the alternative settings review to identify options for any cohorts of students whose needs are not specifically catered to by either alternative or specialist settings, but may struggle in mainstream schools.



Implementation Considerations

Prioritisation of recommendation implementation will be critical to a sustainable and considered change process

To support the conceptualisation of the implementation of these recommendations and the change needed to sustainably deliver additional choice and improved outcomes for parents, carers and students, the resourcing and prioritisation of implementation needs to be carefully considered. The matrix below provides a view of which recommendations could be prioritised for implementation in a manner that would build momentum and confidence in the system.

Recommendations

1

Improve the accessibility of quality information about school options for students with disability.

2

Retain the use of eligibility criteria for enrolment in specialist schools.

3

Retain the use of diagnostically-focused eligibility criteria for enrolment in specialist schools, while updating and improving them.

4

Develop a decision-making framework to guide consideration of functional needs for students found ineligible according to diagnostically-focused criteria.

5

Use a diagnosis of intellectual disability as the threshold for eligibility to schools for students with intellectual disability, rather than specific score cut-offs.

6

Align the diagnostic elements of eligibility criteria for autism schools to contemporary clinical guidelines.

7

Clarify the types of professionals from whom evidence can be submitted for applications to schools for students with physical disability.

8

Ensure consistent eligibility criteria are used by all schools of the same type as appropriate.

9

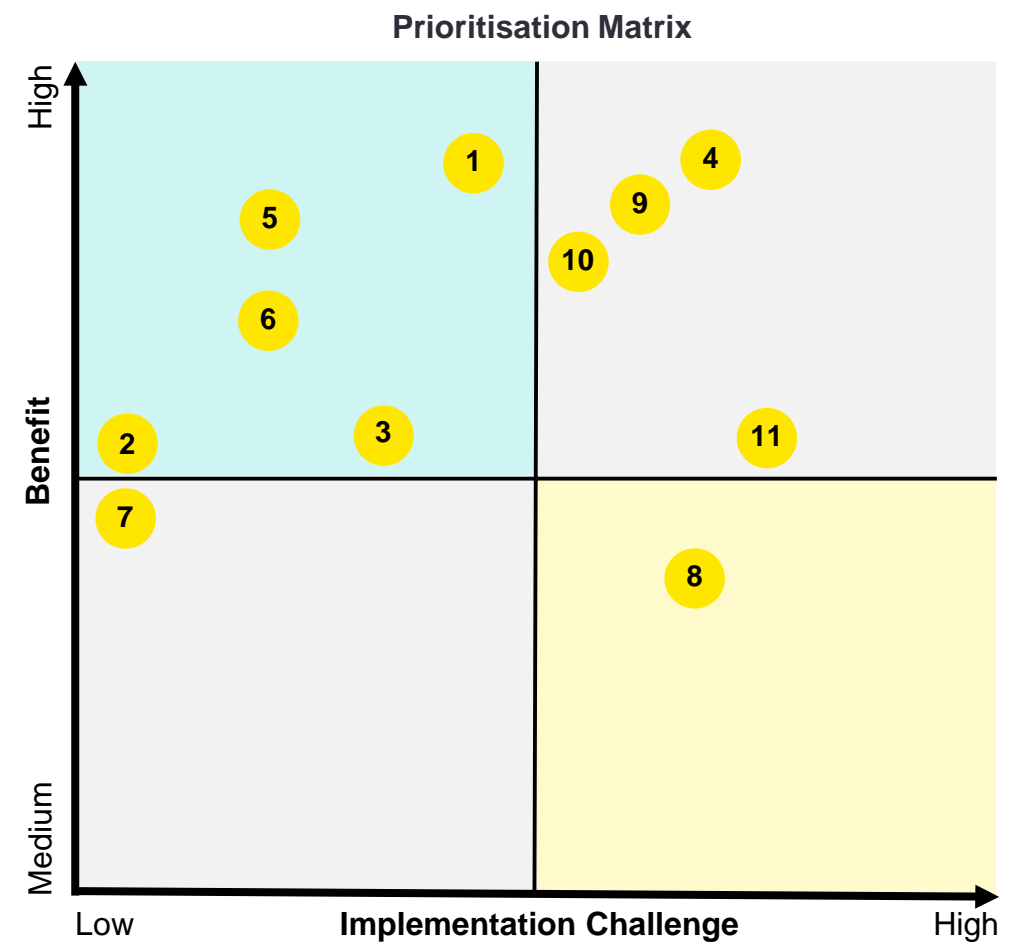
Define a standardised approach to enrolling students and ensure it is applied by all specialist schools.

10

Adjust the eligibility review process to focus on identifying the educational setting that is best-placed to support each student.

11

Improve the collection of data relating to specialist school enrolment.



Within each improvement theme, a series of actions can be undertaken to support the implementation of each recommendation

As part of the implementation design, it is useful to consider what aspects of the recommendations need to be pursued in the immediate term, versus those that can be deferred pending further consideration or where a dependency exists with some enabling work. The table below provides a view on the actions that need to occur now, next and beyond to progress the recommendations under each improvement theme.

	Now	Next	Beyond
Improve Access to Information	<div>Understand needs<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Work with parents/carers to understand the key information about school options, specialist educational support and associated eligibility and enrolment processes.▶ Develop content that provides this information in a clear and easy-to-understand manner, incorporating Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) principles.▶ Test and validate content with a range of parents/carers and other stakeholders who advise them on schooling options.▶ Work with regions and schools to identify those already delivering guidance to key stakeholders such as parents/carers, or are likely well-placed to.▶ Evaluate how much capacity these roles or teams have to take on the new responsibilities.</div>	<div>Improve access<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Determine where the website could most appropriately be located.▶ Develop website, integrating it with existing resources such as 'Find my School' and incorporating SEO principles and a detailed content maintenance plan to ensure long-term sustainability.▶ Develop a communications and awareness strategy.▶ Launch communications and awareness campaign.▶ Provide systematic support for those responsible for providing guidance to key stakeholders such as parents/carers about school options for their children and ensure they are aware of the updated information resources.▶ Develop a content maintenance plan.</div>	<div><ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Provide parents/carers with accurate information by ensuring the centralised information held on the website is kept up-to-date.▶ Continue to improve the accessibility and usefulness of information by engaging with parents/carers to understand their experiences.▶ Continue along the journey to a system more focused on functional need by regularly evaluating which elements of the criteria should be removed, maintained, or further developed.▶ Enhance the efficiency of enrolment processes by evaluating the impacts of changes over time.▶ Ensure any diagnostically-focused criteria are up-to-date by keeping abreast of changes to clinical practice, with active involvement of clinical experts.</div>
Update Eligibility Criteria	<div>Consult and analyse<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Use Disability Inclusion Profiles completed by the existing student population to develop an understanding of the needs catered to by each specialist school, and use this understanding to inform the development of the functional needs decision-making framework.▶ Work with clinical and educational professionals to identify the high functional needs in an education setting that would benefit from the level of specialist support provided by a specialist school.▶ Work with professionals to confirm that the removal of specific score cut-offs and the need for multidisciplinary diagnoses would align criteria more closely with contemporary best-practice, and that removing the need for paediatric reports would not reduce the validity of applications.▶ Work with clinical experts to determine how the contracted assessment service can best conduct diagnostic evaluations without the use of specific score cut-offs.▶ Work further with clinicians to determine the level of evidence necessary to demonstrate a diagnosis of disability for students with physical disability, and which clinicians can provide this.</div>	<div>Develop, test, and implement<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Develop a decision-making framework for specialist school principals to consider whether a student's functional needs are sufficient to make them eligible for enrolment in a specialist school.▶ Work with clinical and educational professionals to update professional guidelines for professionals undertaking assessments to inform specialist school eligibility processes.▶ Develop clear guidance for the contracted assessment service, which can also be used by independent clinicians to understand the evidence required for eligibility.▶ Work with schools to determine and mitigate potential impacts on demand in cases where local criteria differ.▶ Communicate the updated criteria to all relevant stakeholders and ensure they are reflected on any centralised information sources.▶ Support principals and regional staff to effectively apply the revised eligibility criteria and the decision-making framework.▶ Develop an approach to regularly conducting audits to confirm that schools have implemented consistent criteria and kept them up-to-date.</div>	

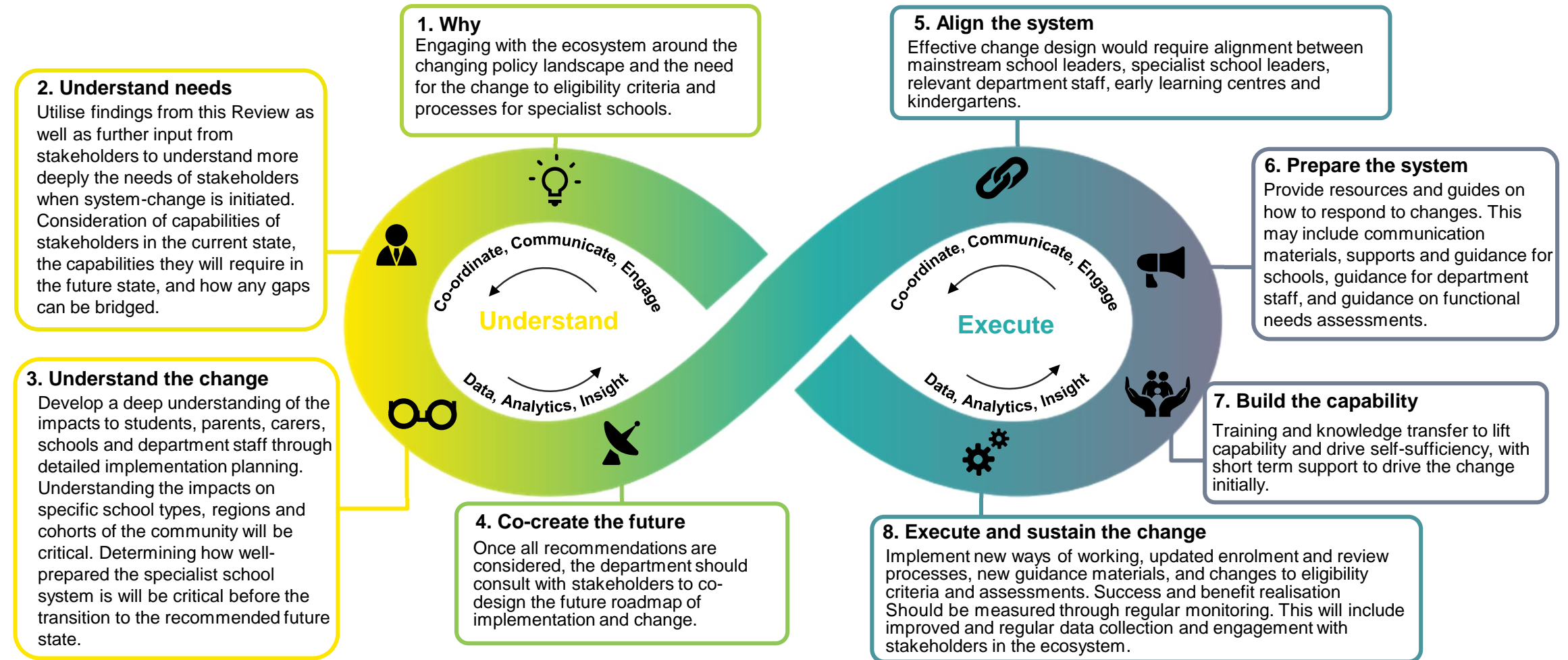
Within each improvement theme, a series of actions can be undertaken to support the implementation of each recommendation

As part of the implementation design, it is useful to consider what aspects of the recommendations need to be pursued in the immediate term, versus those that can be deferred pending further consideration or where a dependency exists with some enabling work. The table below provides a view on the actions that need to occur now, next and beyond to action the recommendations under each improvement theme.

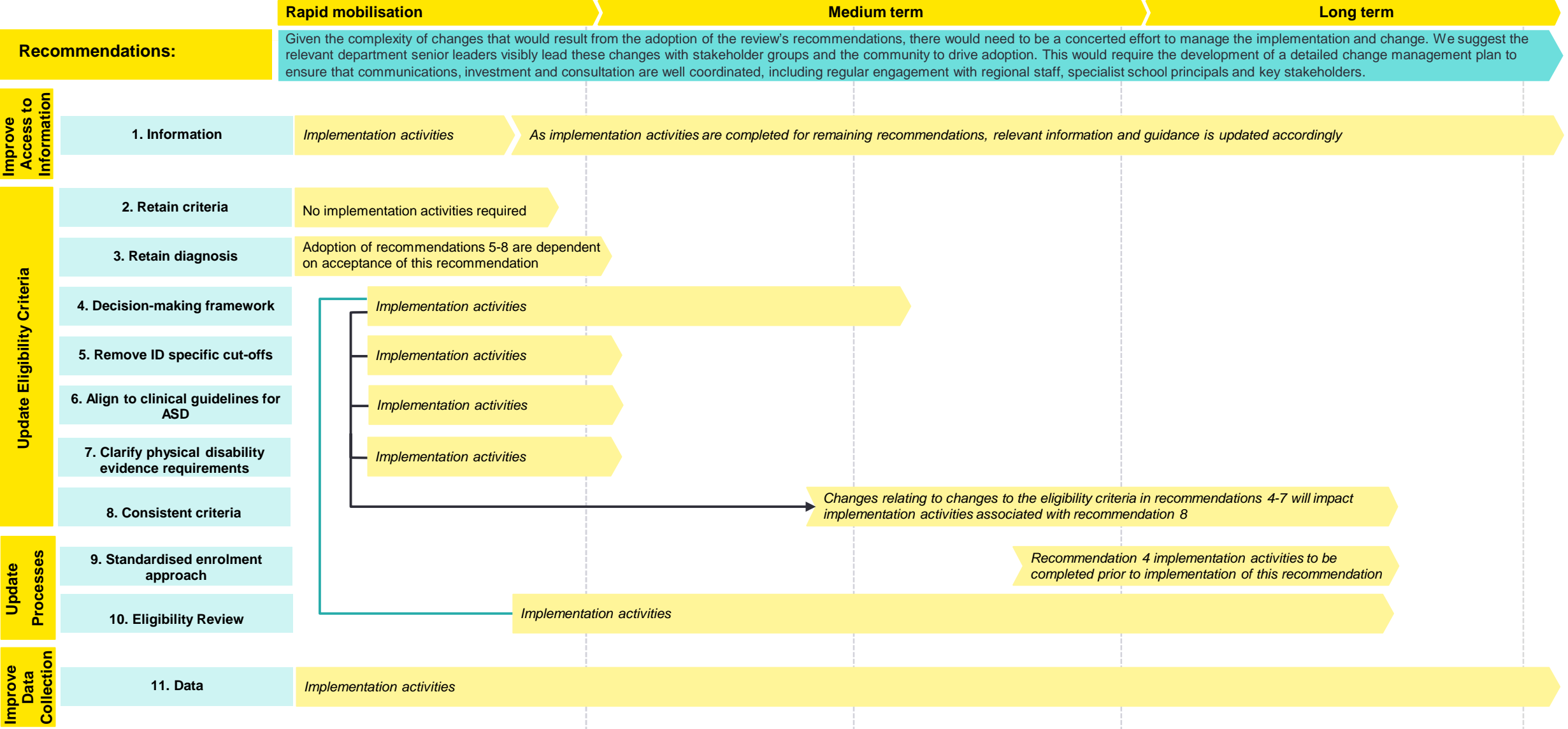
	Now	Next	Beyond
Update Processes	Align on the desired processes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Align on the desired approach to enrolling students and develop clear guidance that outlines how this should be conducted for all enrolment types. Test and validate this approach with schools and regions to ensure it is fit-for-purpose and easy to understand. Align on the department's position towards the purpose of reviews. Determine whether the current review process is capable of fulfilling this purpose, and develop any amendments where necessary. 	Implement the desired processes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement a standardised approach to enrolment across all specialist schools. Develop and distribute a clear and comprehensive purpose statement that outlines the potential outcome of reviews. Develop and distribute clear guidance about the intended review process. Develop a monitoring approach to ensure enrolment processes they are being consistently implemented by all schools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to maximise the utility of review processes by closely monitoring their outcomes evaluating the extent to which they're fulfilling their intended purpose. Improve the accessibility of the enrolment process by working with the departmental team deploying the digital enrolment portal to expand relevant parts of it to specialist schools. Develop a comprehensive, real-time understanding of the specialist school system by continuing to improve collection of data.
Improve Data Collection	Identify what is currently collected <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify data that is currently collected by each region. Develop a mechanism for centrally storing relevant data collected at the regional level. 	Improve what is collected <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extend the planned digital enrolment portal to specialist schools, allowing parents/carers to initiate the enrolment process online if they wish. Consider additional data that may be useful. Identify any needs for regions to change the way that they collect data for the purpose of consistency, and support them to do so. Identify opportunities for individual identifiers to be established for students, and how they can be linked into existing data. 	

A system-wide change approach could be adopted to support successful implementation

An effective change management approach will support the recommendations to be effectively and sustainably embedded within the education system.



Pathway to implementation of 11 recommendations



Improve access to information

Key

Activities

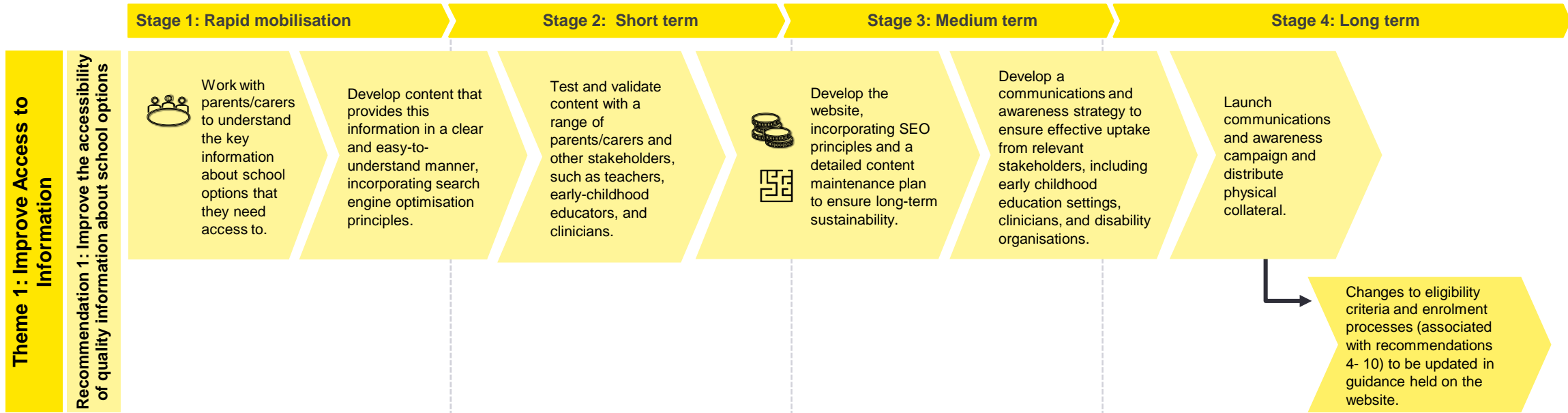
New Investment

Significant Complexity

Consultation

Dependency with other recommendations

Improving transparency and access to information on specialist support and school options for students with disabilities requires consultation within the specialist school ecosystem, development of content and functions and a coordinated implementation and communication approach. Our preliminary view is that a modest amount of new investment may be required to develop the website, but the relevancy of the content could likely be maintained with existing resources.



Update eligibility criteria

Key

Activities

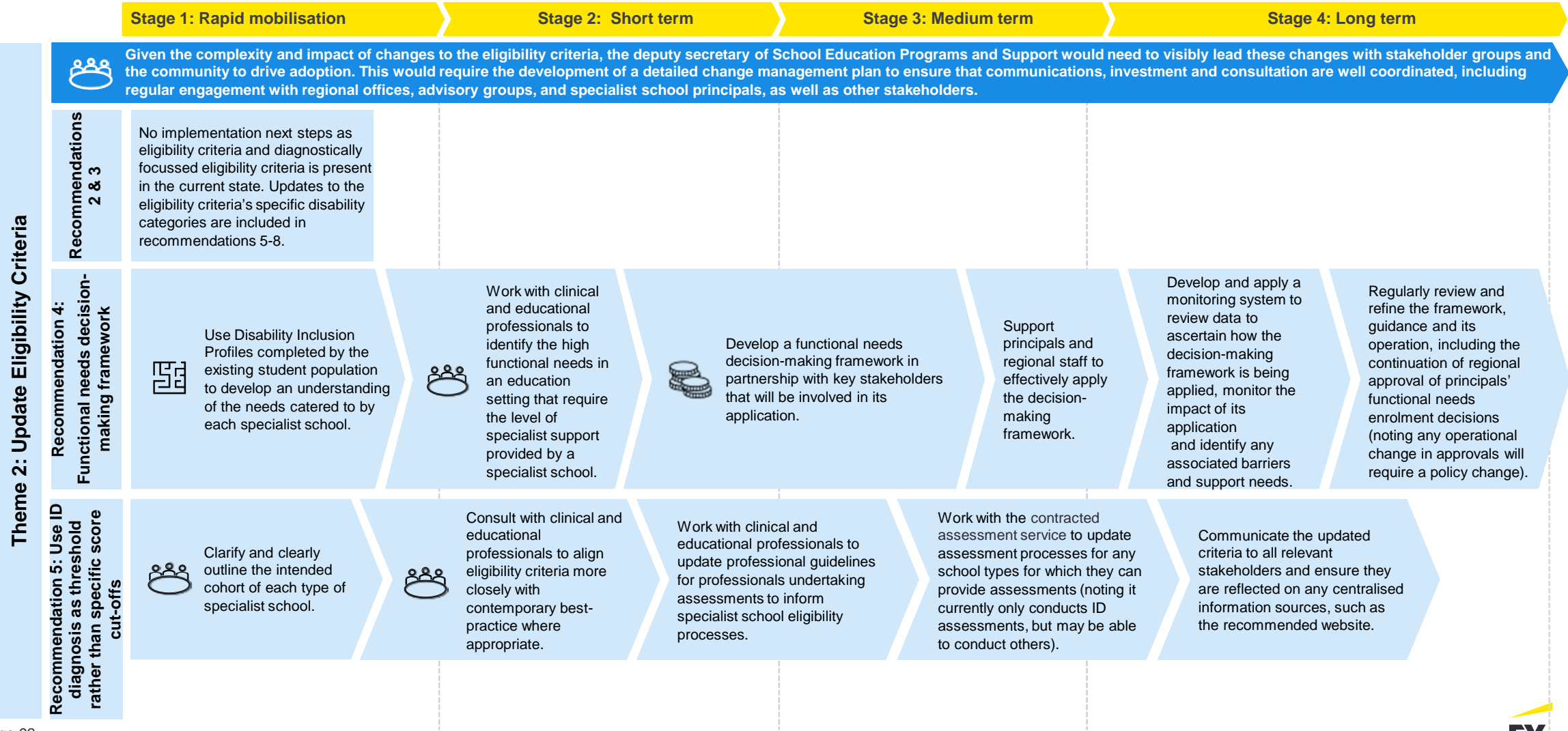
New Investment

Significant Complexity

Consultation

Dependency with other recommendations

Updating the eligibility criteria for enrolment to specialist schools will require a significant consultation and engagement effort by the department, this has been illustrated in the following implementation timeline. Our preliminary view is that a modest investment might be required to develop the functional needs decision making framework if this expertise lies outside the department.



Update eligibility criteria cont.

Key

Activities

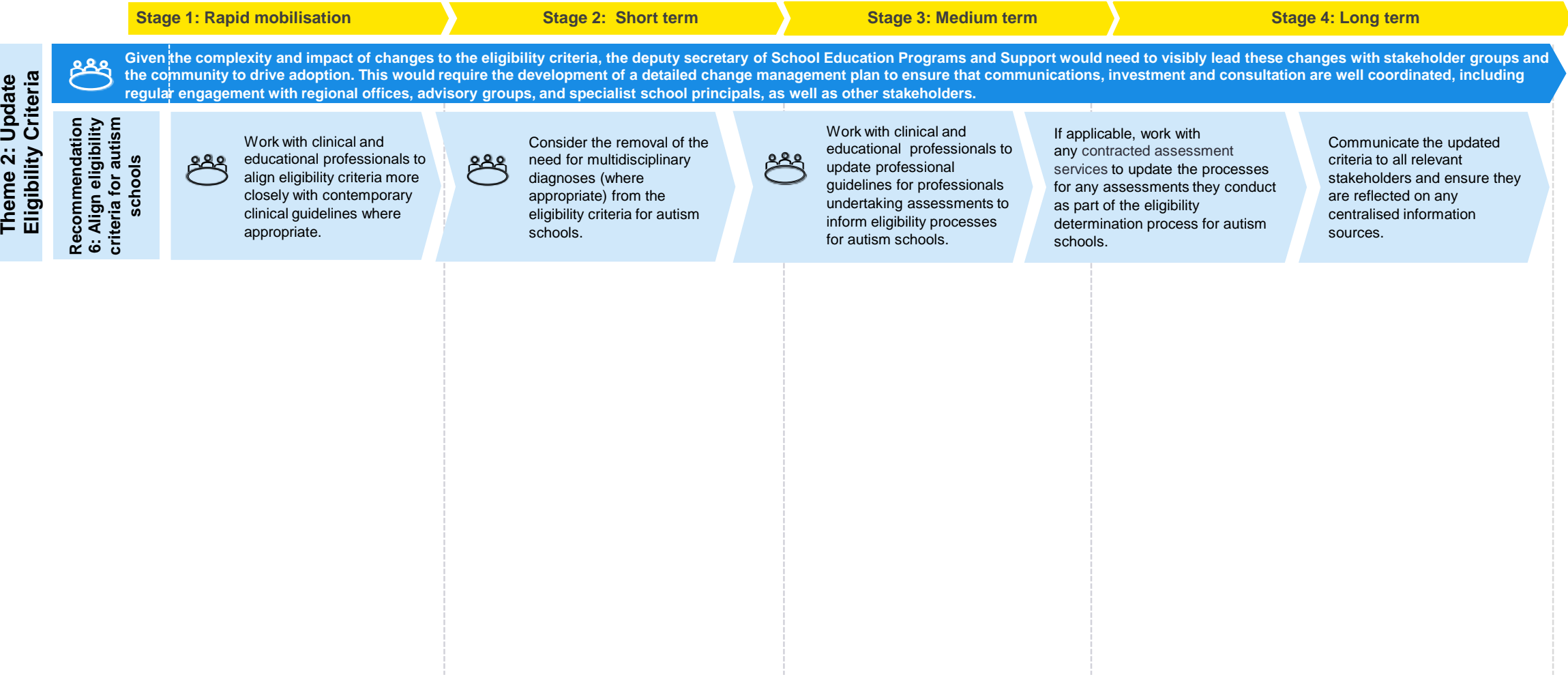
New Investment

Significant Complexity

Consultation

Dependency with other recommendations

The importance of communicating any changes to specialist school eligibility criteria has been included in the following implementation pathway.



Update eligibility criteria cont.

Key

Activities

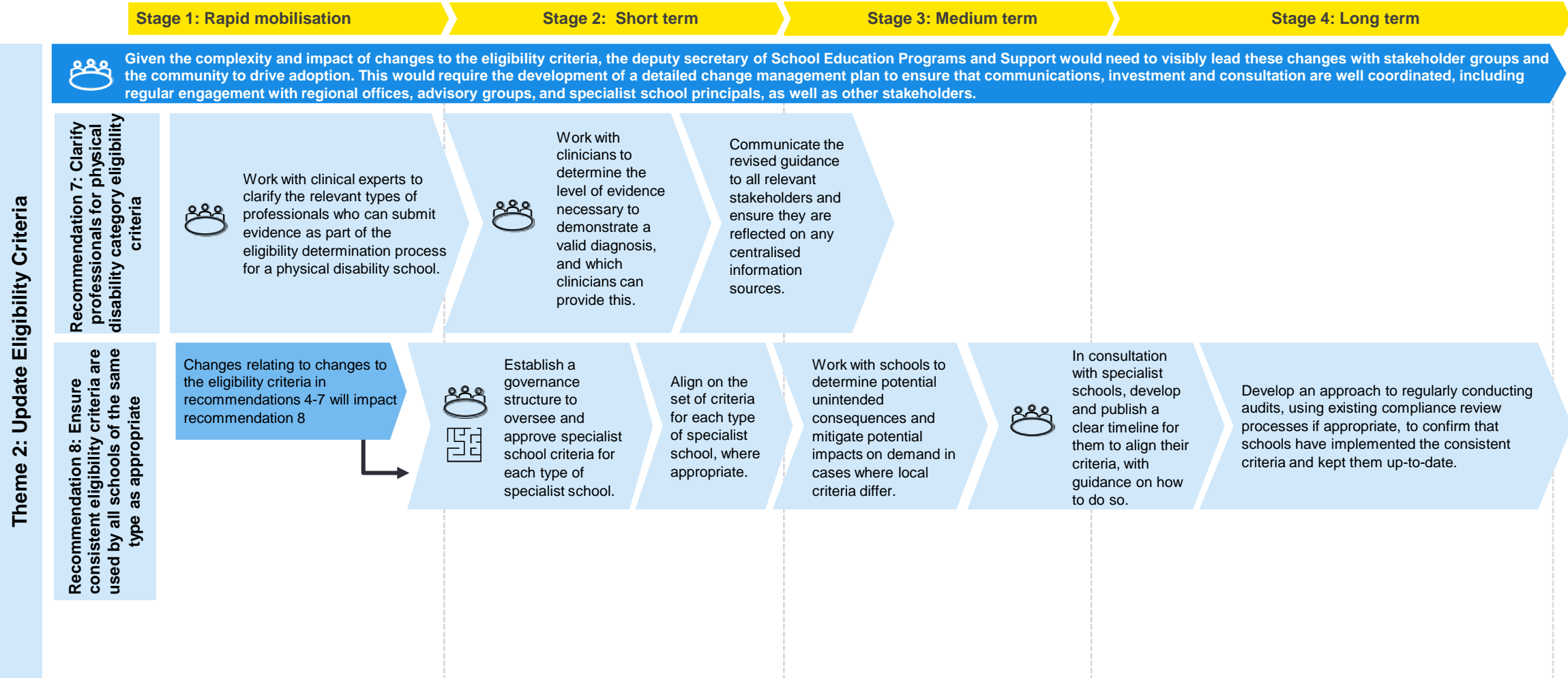
New Investment

Significant Complexity

Consultation

Dependency with other recommendations

The importance of communication of any changes to eligibility criteria for enrolment to specialist schools has been included in the following implementation pathway.



Update processes

Key

Activities

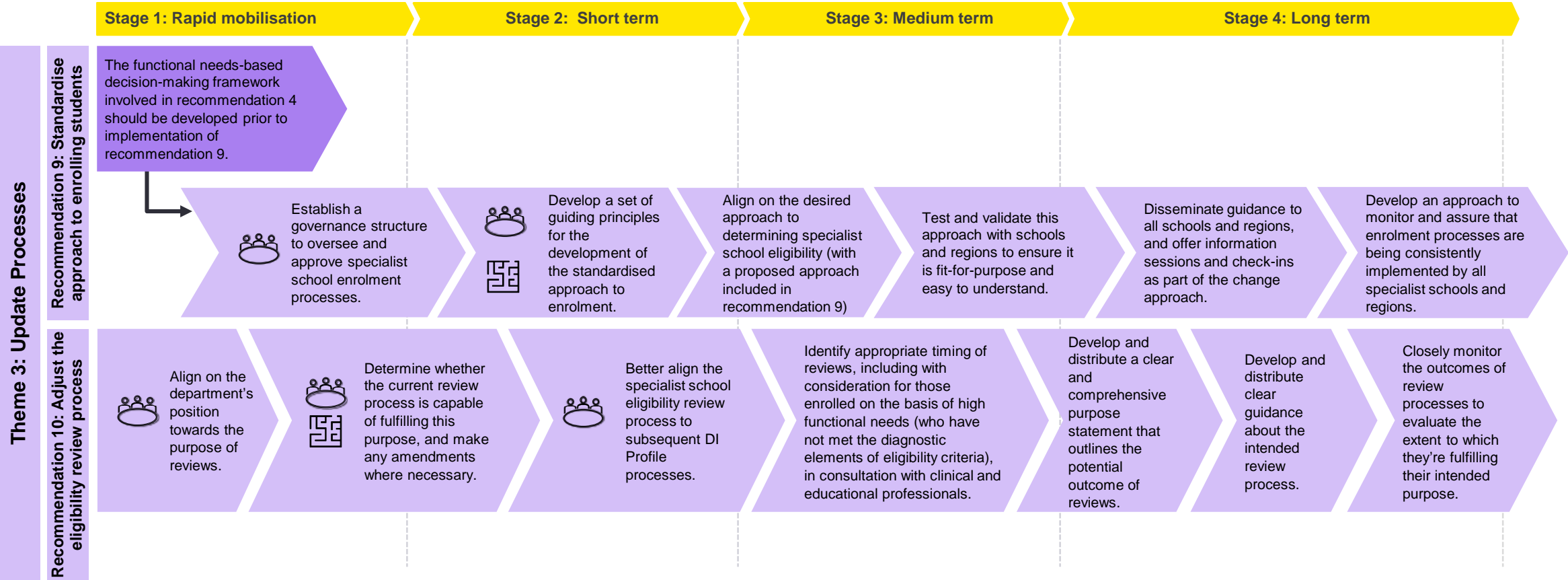
New Investment

Significant Complexity

Consultation

Dependency with other recommendations

Alignment within the department and testing with schools on updates to enrolment processes are a major aspect of the implementation timelines for recommendations 9 and 10.



Improve data collection

Key

Activities

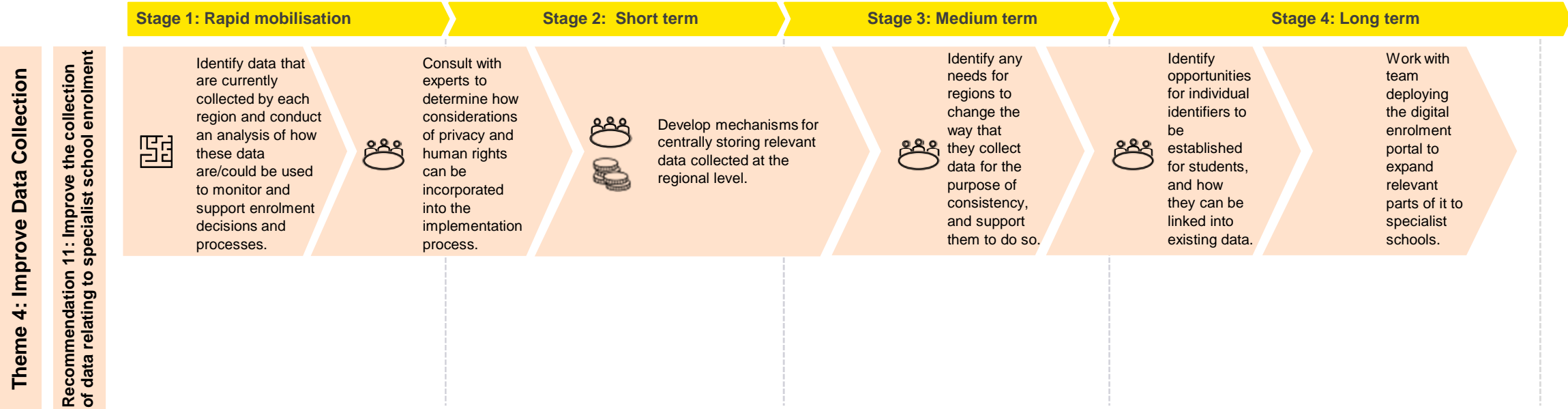
New Investment

Significant Complexity

Consultation

Dependency with other recommendations

Improvements to data collection related to specialist schools in Victoria has layers of complexity and consultation that need to be considered to ensure consistent and effective implementation. Our preliminary view is that a modest amount of investment may be required to develop an appropriate mechanism to store data centrally, if this does not already exist in the department.



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A photograph of a classroom where several students are seated at long wooden tables, each using a tablet computer. In the foreground, two boys are looking at a tablet together, with one pointing at the screen. Other students are visible in the background, also working on their tablets. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a modern educational environment.

Appendix 1 Victoria Current State

Appendix 1: Victoria current state

Outlined in this Appendix section is further detail on specialist school eligibility criteria, the in-depth steps associated with the enrolment process and specialist school provision across Victoria.

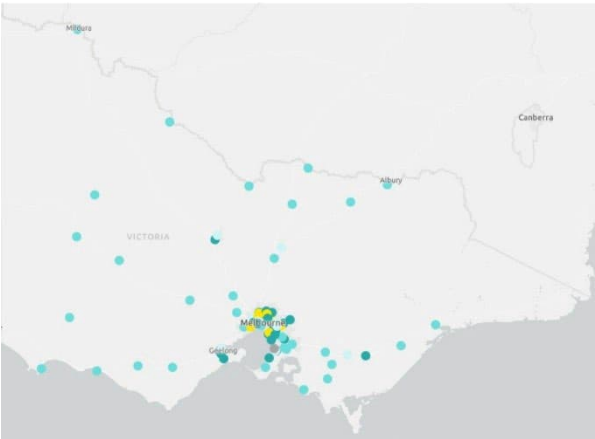
Specialist school eligibility has been summarised into the below categories for each disability type:

- Criteria Summary
- Evidence
- Process
- Documentation Required

Enrolment process for specialist schools:

- Stage 1. Initiation
- Stage 2. Submission
- Stage 3. Evaluation
- Stage 4. Determination
- Stage 5. Review

Specialist school provision across the state:



Eligibility criteria, evidence and processes relevant to schools for students with intellectual disability (the department funds assessments for these schools)

The criteria, evidence, and processes required by the department to demonstrate eligibility for schools for students with intellectual disability are outlined below. These criteria are used by special schools, dual/multi-modal specialist schools, and special developmental schools, as well as Supported Inclusion Schools for out-of-zone enrolments.

Criteria Summary

A diagnosis of Intellectual Disability observed by:

- ▶ sub-average general intellectual functioning, and
- ▶ significant deficits in adaptive behaviour, and
- ▶ history and evidence of an ongoing problem with an expectation of continuation during the school years.

Evidence

- A signed psychologist’s report from within the last 24 months reporting the results of an IQ test and assessment of adaptive behaviour.

Process

- If a student has not already been assessed by a psychologist, they will be referred by the school to the department’s contracted assessment service.
- The assessment service first performs an adaptive behaviour assessment (the Vineland) as a screener. If the student scores below the eligibility threshold (i.e. the Vineland score is within the required range), the assessment service will then perform an IQ test to assess general intellectual functioning.
- Students may also be referred to the assessment service during the evaluation process if existing evidence does not meet guidelines, for example if their assessment is out-of-date or was formulated using a non-approved assessment tool.

1. https://www.psychiatry.org/File%20Library/Psychiatrists/Practice/DSM/APA_DSM-5-Intellectual-Disability.pdf
Note: Detailed Criteria source - Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD) | Victorian Government. (2021). Vic.gov.au. <https://www.vic.gov.au/program-students-disabilities-psd>

Documentation Required

PSD Application:

- A signed copy of the Application Summary Form.
- A printed copy of the completed online Application Summary Form from Program for Students with Disabilities Management System.
- A Student Learning and Support Statement (Goals and Strategies).
- A covering letter from the principal of the school completing the application.
- A signed report from a psychologist containing:
 - A current cognitive assessment (not more than two years old)
 - A current Vineland Adaptive Behaviour Scale (not more than one year old)
- Evidence of a history of ongoing difficulties.
- Current evidence and reports to support agreed Educational Needs Questionnaire levels.

Disability Category Verification Request (Disability Inclusion):

- A completed and signed specialist school disability verification request form.
- A signed report from a psychologist containing:
 - A current cognitive assessment (not more than two years old)
 - A current Vineland Adaptive Behaviour Scale (not more than one year old)
- Evidence of a history of ongoing difficulties.

Different School Type-Based Criteria

- Dual/multi-mode Schools – for students with mild to profound intellectual disability (FSIQ of 70 and below)
- Special Schools – for students with mild intellectual disability (FSIQ between 50* and 70)
- Special Developmental Schools – for students

with moderate to profound intellectual disability (FSIQ below 50*).

*some regions set the specific score cut-off for Special Development Schools at 55

Eligibility criteria, evidence and processes relevant to autism schools (requires evidence from multiple clinicians)

The criteria, evidence, and processes required by the department to demonstrate eligibility for autism schools are outlined below.

Criteria Summary	Documentation Required	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">A multi-disciplinary diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder, andsignificant deficits in adaptive behaviour, andsignificant deficits in language skills.	PSD Application: <ul style="list-style-type: none">A signed copy of the Application Summary Form.A printed copy of the completed online Application Summary Form from Program for Students with Disabilities Management System.A Student Learning and Support Statement (Goals and Strategies).A covering letter from the principal of the school completing the application.A multidisciplinary diagnosis of an Autism Spectrum Disorder containing:<ul style="list-style-type: none">A paediatrician/psychiatrist reportA speech pathology reportA psychology reportA signed report from a psychologist containing a current Vineland Adaptive Behaviour Scale (not more than one year old).A signed report from a speech pathologist containing a current comprehensive speech pathology assessment (not more than one year old).Current evidence and reports to support agreed Educational Needs Questionnaire levels.	Disability Category Verification Request (Disability Inclusion): <ul style="list-style-type: none">A completed and signed specialist school disability verification request form.A multidisciplinary diagnosis of an Autism Spectrum Disorder containing:<ul style="list-style-type: none">A paediatrician/psychiatrist reportA speech pathology reportA psychology reportA signed report from a psychologist containing a current Vineland Adaptive Behaviour Scale (not more than one year old).A signed report from a speech pathologist containing a current comprehensive speech pathology assessment (not more than one year old).
Evidence		
<ul style="list-style-type: none">A multidisciplinary diagnosis provided by professionals with experience and knowledge in the assessment of Autism Spectrum Disorder that includes:<ul style="list-style-type: none">a comprehensive report from a child psychiatrist or paediatricianconcurring reports signed by a psychologist, including a comprehensive assessment of adaptive behaviour (not more than 12 months old)a signed report from a speech pathologist containing a comprehensive speech pathology assessment (not more than 12 months old)and where appropriate, an occupational therapist assessment.		
Process		
<ul style="list-style-type: none">The school will arrange for an adaptive behaviour assessment (the Vineland) and/or language assessment to be conducted through the Student Support Services team if a student does not possess one already, which will not incur a cost for parentsParents/carers are required to arrange diagnostic assessments and reports from paediatricians and speech pathologists, as well as occupational therapists where appropriate.		

Eligibility criteria, evidence and processes relevant to schools for the deaf do not address educational need

The criteria, evidence, and processes required by the department to demonstrate eligibility for schools for the deaf are outlined below.

Criteria Summary

- Students are required to have a permanent, bilateral sensorineural hearing loss of greater than 40dB across at least three frequencies.
- The student requires intervention or assistance to communicate.

Evidence

- An audiogram with a written statement is required from a qualified audiologist.
- Evidence that the student requires intervention or assistance to communicate from a relevant professional.

Process

- Parents/carers are required to arrange for their child to see an audiologist and have a hearing assessment.

Documentation Required

PSD Application:

- A signed copy of the Application Summary Form.
- A printed copy of the completed online Application Summary Form from Program for Students with Disabilities Management System.
- A Student Learning and Support Statement (Goals and Strategies).
- A covering letter from the principal of the school completing the application.
- A current signed audiogram from an audiologist (not more than 12 months old), or for students with cochlear implants, a signed statement from the cochlear implant clinic (not more than 2 years old).
- Evidence that the student requires intervention or assistance to communicate from a relevant professional.
- Current evidence and reports to support agreed Educational Needs Questionnaire levels.

Disability Category Verification Request (Disability Inclusion):

- A completed and signed specialist school disability verification request form.
- A current signed audiogram from an audiologist (not more than 12 months old), or for students with cochlear implants, a signed statement from the cochlear implant clinic (not more than 2 years old).
- Evidence that the student requires intervention or assistance to communicate from a relevant professional.

Eligibility criteria, evidence and processes for schools for students with physical disability

The criteria, evidence, and processes required by the department to demonstrate eligibility for schools for students with physical disability are outlined below.

Criteria Summary

- A significant physical disability and/or
- a significant health impairment and
- requires regular paramedical support.

Evidence

- A statement detailing the disability or health impairment from a paediatrician or relevant medical specialist and
- a statement detailing paramedical service requirements from a registered physiotherapist or occupational therapist.

Process

- Parents/carers are required to arrange for their child to receive written confirmation of their condition by a paediatrician (or relevant medical specialist), which is not arranged or funded by the department.

Documentation Required

PSD Application:










- A signed copy of the Application Summary Form.
- A printed copy of the completed online Application Summary Form from Program for Students with Disabilities Management System.
- A Student Learning and Support Statement (Goals and Strategies).
- A covering letter from the principal of the school completing the application.
- A current report from a paediatrician or relevant medical specialist (not more than two years old).
- A current signed report from a paramedical professional (not more than two years old).
- Current evidence and reports to support agreed Educational Needs Questionnaire levels.

Disability Category Verification Request (Disability Inclusion):

- A completed and signed specialist school disability verification request form.
- A current report from a paediatrician or relevant medical specialist (not more than two years old).
- A current signed report from a paramedical professional (not more than two years old).

Detailed enrolment process steps

Outlined below is a description of each step of the specialist school enrolment journey and the key contributors required at the initiation and submission stages of enrolment.

Stage 1. Initiation	
	
Key Contributors	Step 1 – Identification of preference for a specialist school
 Parents/ carers	To initiate the specialist school enrolment process, parents/carers must first decide that they wish to enrol their child in a specialist school. This may occur early in a child's development as health professionals, early childhood educators, or family and friends provide advice. In cases where parents/carers do not have access to this advice or evidence of developmental delay is subtle or late-onset, this identification may occur much later.
 Clinicians	Step 2 – Identification of specialist school
 School staff	Parents/carers identify the specialist school that they wish to apply to. This choice is often informed by advice from others, including from health professionals, family, friends, online communities and early-learning staff. In regional areas the choice may be relatively simple due to the scarcity of specialist schools, often meaning that parents/carers will only have a single option.
Stage 2. Submission	
	
Key Contributors	Step 3 – Collection of documentation
 Parents/ carers	To submit a request for specialist school eligibility verification/evaluation, documentation that provides evidence of a child's disability must first be collected. This process is guided by the specialist school that the child's parents/carers have chosen to apply to; it can also be guided by a mainstream school the child is currently enrolled at. The contracted assessment service, funded by the department, will complete an assessment for intellectual disability if there is not a current cognitive assessment.
 Clinicians	Step 4 – Student Support Group established
 School staff	A Student Support Group (SSG) is established for each student applying for enrolment in a specialist school, for the purpose of guiding a family through the application process and submitting necessary documentation. The SSG consists of the school principal or their nominee, the student's parent/carers (and advocate, if requested), and the student themselves where appropriate. The SSG examines existing documentation and completes an Education Needs Questionnaire (ENQ) for PSD applications, or a specialist school disability category verification request for schools in DI areas.
 Regional Disability Coordinators	Step 5 – Application Submission
	Once relevant evidence and documentation has been collated, the school is responsible for submitting the completed application to the department for verification.

Detailed enrolment process steps cont.

Outlined below is a description of each step of the specialist school enrolment journey and the key contributors required at the evaluation and determination stages of enrolment.

Stage 3. Evaluation

Key Contributors

Parents/
carers

School staff

Clinicians

Step 6 – Disability category verification

In the Evaluation stage, the student's disability category is evaluated by an external verification/evaluation service. This service is responsible for confirming whether a student meets the criteria for the nominated disability category/categories. In cases where it is believed a student has an intellectual disability but has not undergone the relevant clinical evaluation, they may be referred for an assessment by the contracted assessment service. Importantly, this step can be initiated in Stage2: Submission or Stage 3: Evaluation, depending on whether the need for additional assessment is identified by the SSG or the verification service.

Stage 4. Determination

Key Contributors

Parents/
carers

Clinicians

School staff

Regional
Disability
Coordinators

Step 7 – Consideration of eligibility under the disability category

Individual schools are responsible for determining the eligibility of students, considering the outcome of the disability category verification request and any additional local criteria. Regional staff can also assist schools with this process.

Step 8 – Consideration of non-standard enrolment (where relevant)


In cases where a student does not meet eligibility criteria (either according to the disability categories or the school's own additional criteria where relevant), but the parent/carer continues to seek enrolment, the specialist school must inform the parent/carer that they may formally appeal by requesting the school to submit a non-standard enrolment application. Non-standard enrolment applications are considered on a case-by-case basis. The regional office considers the evidence provided through the non-standard enrolment application (including the principal's recommendation) to determine whether to approve the non-standard enrolment. The department's central office provides regional office staff with guidance on grounds for non-standard enrolments rather than specific criteria. Therefore, non-standard enrolments are granted according to the professional judgement of departmental regional staff, considering all the circumstances surrounding the student and their learning and wellbeing needs.

Step 9 – Notification


Once a student's eligibility has been determined and a decision to offer or deny an enrolment (standard or non-standard) has been made, schools must notify the student and their parent/carer of the decision. This conversation will typically be carried out by principals, however they may choose to delegate this responsibility to an appropriate staff member that has been involved in the process.


Enrolment reviews occur periodically throughout a student's enrolment in a specialist school


Enrolment reviews (and associated funding reviews in PSD schools) usually occur at the grade 6 age-equivalent point for students enrolled under a standard enrolment at a specialist school. Additional reviews occur for students enrolled under a non-standard enrolment or a short-term enrolment where a short-term outcome has been assigned.




Stage 5. Review

Parents/
carers

Clinicians

School staff

Regional
Disability
Coordinators

Key Contributors

Step 10 – Eligibility Review

For students on standard enrolments, their eligibility will be reviewed:

- in the grade 6 age-equivalent year under the PSD system (except for students who receive the highest PSD funding at levels 5 or 6), or
- prior to a student’s DI Profile review under the Disability Inclusion system
- for students on non-standard enrolments, these reviews take place annually.

These reviews are intended to assess whether students continue to meet the specialist school’s disability category as outlined in the eligibility criteria. If a student is no longer eligible their parent/carer can seek a non-standard enrolment or they can transition to a mainstream school, or another specialist school.

For students on non-standard enrolments, reviews are an opportunity for the SSG to discuss whether the current setting continues to meet the student's needs or whether transition to another setting is recommended. Using the outcomes of these discussions, the school may apply for a continuation of the NSE where applicable.

In some cases, where a student is considered to be on the cusp of eligibility, entry to a specialist school may be provisionally granted on the basis that a short-term review is undertaken. Where there is a reasonable expectation that the student’s support needs could change over a period of time or where a review of the student’s situation might further clarify their educational needs, an end date may be assigned and an appropriate review date will be set during the evaluation process.

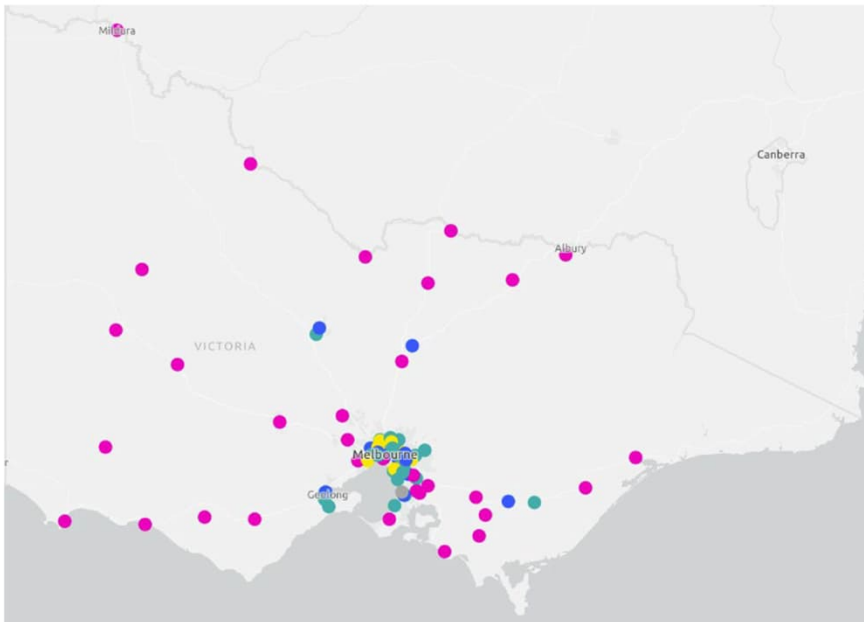
It has been reported that the review process can be a particularly stressful and burdensome experience for some parents, carers and students. For further details on these challenges, refer to findings in the findings section on page 37.



Types of specialist schools across Victoria

Availability of specialist education in wider Victoria is highly influenced by location and often does not focus on specific disability.

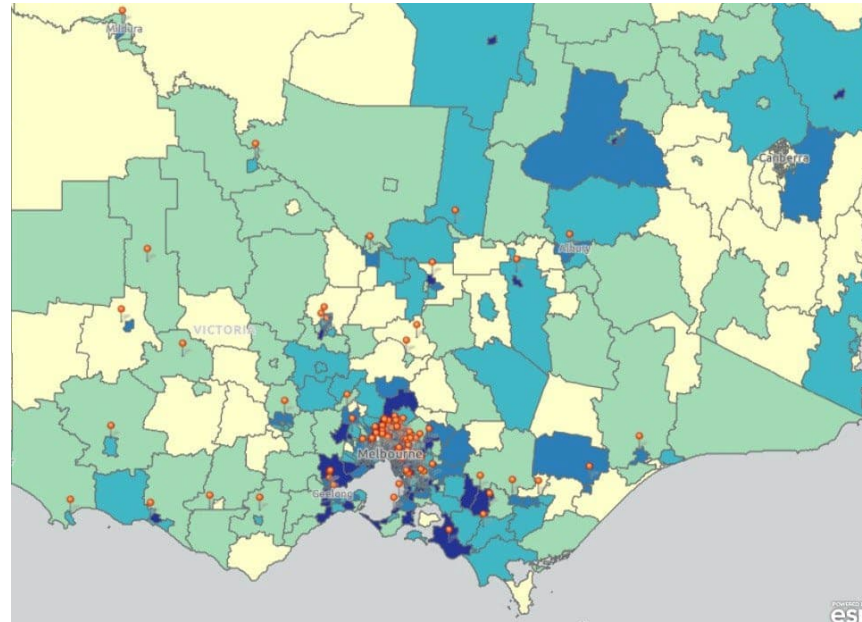
Figure 1: Specialist School Provision Across Victoria



■ ID – Mild ■ ID – Mild – Profound ■ ID – Moderate – Profound
■ Autism ■ Physical Disability

Data sourced from department of Education Specialist Schools as of 28 February 2023

Figure 2: Population Density Compared with Specialist School Provision – Across Victoria



2021 Estimated resident population (no.)

- 650,000 or more
- 300,000 to 649,999
- 130,000 to 299,999
- 50,000 to 129,999
- 0 to 49,999

Data sourced from ABS Estimated resident population 2021.

Discussion

In Victoria, the availability of specialist education is heavily dependent on location. Wider Melbourne has the greatest density of specialist schools and the broadest variety of specialist school types.

In general, specialist schools outside of Melbourne cater to students with a broader range of intellectual disability (mild – profound). By contrast, specialist schools in Melbourne tend to be more specialised in catering to particular types of disability, with autism and physical disability schools only present in Melbourne Metro areas.

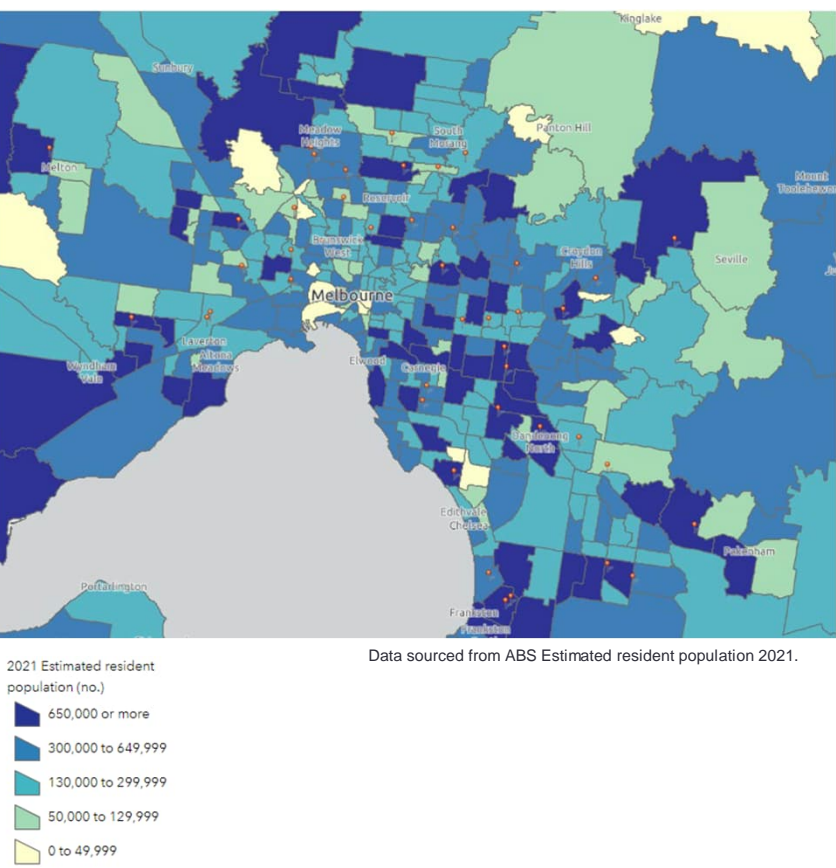
Types of specialist schools across wider Melbourne

Availability of specialist education in wider Melbourne is greater than Victoria more broadly, with more options for schools for specific disability types.

Figure 3: Specialist School Provision Across Wider Melbourne



Figure 4: Population Density Compared with Specialist School Provision – Wider Melbourne



Discussion

Wider Melbourne has a greater diversity of specialist school types. To demonstrate this, autism and physical disability schools are only present in Melbourne Metro areas.

Melbourne also has a greater availability of specialist schools across the city; this may largely be a result of a greater resident population than regional and rural Victoria.

Victorian specialist schools with enrolments above 90% of indicative capacity (2023)

DET Region	DET Area	School Name	Specialisation	2023 Indicative Capacity	Enrolments #	Enrolment pressure index %
South East	Southern Melbourne	Marnebek School Cranbourne	Intellectual Disability (mild to profound)	360	406.8	113
North East	Inner Eastern Melbourne	Glenallen School	Physical disability	152	162.6	107
North East	Inner Eastern Melbourne	Monash Special Developmental School	Intellectual Disability (moderate to profound)	152	161.8	106
North West	North Eastern Melbourne	Northern School For Autism	Autism	448	473.6	106
North East	Goulburn	Seymour College (specialist campus)	Intellectual Disability (mild to profound)	55	57.0	104
South West	Western Melbourne	Warringa Park School	Intellectual Disability (mild to profound)	671	684.0	102
North East	Outer Eastern Melbourne	Eastern Ranges School	Autism	192	193.0	101
North East	Inner Eastern Melbourne	Vermont South Special School	Intellectual Disability (mild)	147	146.6	100
North West	Hume Merri-bek	Jacana School for Autism	Autism	224	220.7	99
South West	Brimbank Melton	Jackson School	Intellectual Disability (mild)	288	281.2	98
South West	Brimbank Melton	Sunshine Special Developmental School	Intellectual Disability (moderate to profound)	208	198.4	95
South East	Southern Melbourne	Springvale Park Special Developmental School	Intellectual Disability (moderate to profound)	224	213.0	95
South West	Brimbank Melton	Melton Specialist School	Intellectual Disability (mild to profound)	376	356.0	95
South West	Wimmera South West	Horsham Special School	Intellectual Disability (mild to profound)	104	98.2	94
South West	Western Melbourne	Western Autistic School	Autism	312	292.0	95
South West	Wimmera South West	Portland Bay School	Intellectual Disability (mild to profound)	70	65.2	93
North West	North Eastern Melbourne	Concord School	Intellectual Disability (mild)	456	420.8	92
North East	Goulburn	Verney Road School	Intellectual Disability (mild to profound)	250	229.4	92
South East	Bayside Peninsula	Southern Autistic School	Autism	312	285.4	91
North East	Inner Eastern Melbourne	Burwood East Special Developmental School	Intellectual Disability (moderate to profound)	90	81.4	90
North East	Inner Eastern Melbourne	Ashwood School	Intellectual Disability (mild)	147	132.6	90
North West	Hume Merri-bek	Sunbury And Macedon Ranges Specialist School	Intellectual Disability (mild to profound)	300	269.8	90
South West	Wimmera South West	Merri River School	Intellectual Disability (mild to profound)	184	164.8	90

Note: 2023 capacity data was used in this report as data from 2024 was not available in time for sufficient analysis

Victorian specialist schools with enrolments between 80% and 90% of indicative capacity (2023)

DET Region	DET Area	School Name	Specialisation	2023 Indicative Capacity	Enrolments #	Enrolment pressure index %
South West	Barwon	Colac Specialist School	Intellectual Disability (mild to profound)	68	60.8	89
North West	Hume Merri-bek	Broadmeadows Special Developmental School	Intellectual Disability (moderate to profound)	376	335.8	89
South West	Western Melbourne	Yarraville Special Developmental School	Intellectual Disability (moderate to profound)	88	77.6	88
North East	Ovens Murray	Belvoir Wodonga Special Developmental School	Intellectual Disability (mild to profound)	207	182.5	88
North West	Hume Merri-bek	Glenroy Specialist School	Physical disability	160	141.0	713
North East	Inner Eastern Melbourne	Heatherwood School	Intellectual Disability (mild)	288	253.0	88
South East	Inner Gippsland	Latrobe Special Developmental School	Intellectual Disability (moderate to profound)	88	76.4	88
South East	Bayside Peninsula	Frankston Special Developmental School	Intellectual Disability (moderate to profound)	144	123.0	87
South East	Inner Gippsland	Bass Coast Specialist School	Intellectual Disability (mild to profound)	72	61.4	85
South East	Inner Gippsland	Warragul & District Specialist School	Intellectual Disability (mild to profound)	132	111.9	85
North East	Outer Eastern Melbourne	Yarra Ranges Special Developmental School	Intellectual Disability (moderate to profound)	96	80.1	85
North West	Loddon Campaspe	Bendigo Special Developmental School	Intellectual Disability (moderate to profound)	184	152.2	83
South West	Western Melbourne	Jennings Street School	Autism	144	119.0	83
North East	Inner Eastern Melbourne	Bulleen Heights School	Autism	280	228.8	83
South East	Southern Melbourne	Officer Specialist School	Intellectual Disability (mild to profound)	408	333.2	82
South West	Wimmera South West	Skene Street School Stawell	Intellectual Disability (mild to profound)	60	49.0	82
North West	Mallee	Mildura Specialist School	Intellectual Disability (mild to profound)	232	185.2	82

Note: 2023 capacity data was used in this report as data from 2024 was not available in time for sufficient analysis

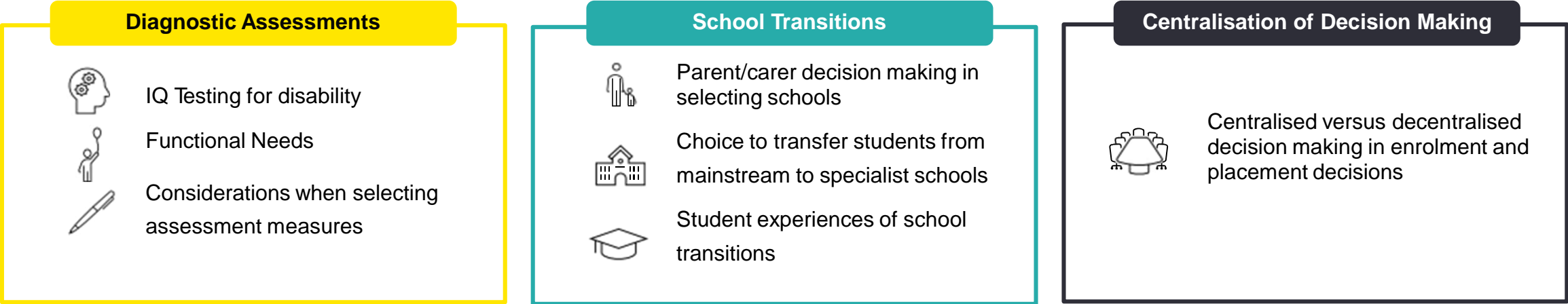


Appendix 2 Literature Review

Appendix 2: Literature review

During the course of the literature review, there were no studies identified that specifically investigated the criteria and enrolment processes of specialist schools, as well as the effects these have on students, parents/carers. However, a variety of clinical and educational studies were identified that provided valuable perspectives. The literature review was limited to articles sourced from credible, peer-reviewed journals, and we prioritised the inclusion of research that had been published recently. The principal findings from this body of research have been condensed and organised into three main themes, outlined below:

Key topics investigated in Literature Review:



Diagnostic assessments: IQ

A diagnosis of intellectual disability has traditionally been formulated with the application of an IQ assessment, with the Wechsler body of tests (i.e. the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children or WISC) considered a standard tool for doing so (Flanagan & Alfonso, 2017). However, contemporary approaches require additional domains of functioning to be considered alongside IQ to develop a holistic understanding of an individual's intellectual capacity.

High-level summary of facts and key themes

IQ Testing for Disability

- A range of researchers (Flanagan & Alfonso, 2017; Flanagan, McGrew, Ortiz, 2000) have found that the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Fifth Edition (WISC) has diagnostic validity for assessment of intelligence in children using a robust five-factor structure, with greater clinical application for neuropsychological assessment, however researchers note a range of strengths and weaknesses.
- There are multiple IQ assessments which have also demonstrated high levels of validity and reliability, and which offer appropriate alternatives to the WISC for specific use cases such as differing verbal capabilities and cultural/linguistic backgrounds (Kumar et al., 2021; Mungketklang et al., 2016; Crisp, 2007).

Raven's Coloured Progressive Matrices

Wechsler Non-Verbal Test of Ability

Test of Non-Verbal Intelligence

Stanford Binet Intelligence Test

Kaufman Assessment Battery

- However, Colmar, Maxwell & Miller (2006) found the use of IQ tests as a main means of assessing intellectual disability in children to be flawed. Contemporary approaches, as espoused in the DSM-5-TR, strongly emphasise holistic formulations of ID diagnoses that incorporate evidence from multiple assessments of differing domains, as relying solely upon IQ is not a valid and reliable method.
- Fletcher & Miciak (2019) provide 5 recommendations for increasing the reliability of learning disability identification. Although learning disabilities represent deficiency in one component of IQ as opposed to intellectual disability which reflects a general deficiency across collective IQ, it is reasonable to infer that these recommendations are also useful when assessing the latter.
 - Use multiple data points** for accurate identification of specific learning disabilities, as relying on one test or criterion is not enough. Multiple indicators are important in detecting problems, assessing skills, and informing future interventions.
 - Avoid specific cut-off points**, as they are typically arbitrary and can exclude students who need support.
 - Use confidence intervals** to account for uncertainty and potential error in scores, allowing for more accurate and informed diagnostic decisions.
 - Employ high thresholds for treatment planning**, as early support is crucial and it is better to provide interventions than to miss students in need.
 - Use tests with the same normative bases** to reduce variability and improve decision-making.

Research Significance

There is a wide variety of validated, reliable, and highly regarded IQ assessments that are appropriate for specific use cases, such as when students are non-verbal or come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The findings of this research indicates that relying on specific IQ score cut-offs to assess ID in students is not valid, nor is relying on IQ scores alone.

Colmar, Susan & Maxwell, Amanda & Miller, Leanne. (2006). Assessing Intellectual Disability in Children: Are IQ Measures Sufficient, or Even Necessary?. *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling - AUST J GUID COUNS.* 16. 177-188. 10.1375/ajgc.16.2.177. Crisp, Cheryl. (2007). The efficacy of intelligence testing in children with physical disabilities, visual impairments and/or the inability to speak. *International Journal of Special Education.* 22. 137-141. Fletcher, J. M., & Miciak, J. (2019). The Identification of Specific Learning Disabilities: A Summary of Research on Best Practices. Austin, TX: Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk., Kumar, S., Kartikey, D., & Singh, T. (2021). Intelligence Tests for Different Age Groups and Intellectual Disability: A Brief Overview. *Journal of Psychosocial Research*, 16(1), 199-209.. Mungketklang C, Crewther SG, Bavin EL, Goharpey N and Parsons C (2016) Comparison of Measures of Ability in Adolescents with Intellectual Disability. *Front. Psychol.* 7:683. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00683, Flanagan, D.P. & Alfonso, V. C., (2017), *Essentials of WISC-V Assessment*, J. Wiley and Sons; Flanagan, D. P., McGrew, K. S., & Ortiz, S. O. (2000). *The Wechsler Intelligence Scales and Gf-Gc theory: A contemporary approach to interpretation*. Allyn & Bacon.

Diagnostic assessments: Functional needs

Clinical approaches to disability are increasingly adapting a bio-psycho-social model that places emphasis on an individual's ability to function in their environment rather than their assessed intellectual capacity. Although assessments of functioning to evaluate a student's eligibility for a specialist school can be conducted by a wide range of clinicians, there is no consistent trans-disciplinary approach to assessing or defining functional needs (D'Arcy et al., 2023).

High-level summary of facts and key themes

Adaptive Behaviour

- Adaptive behaviour (alternatively referred to as adaptive functioning) is the collection of an individual's conceptual, social, and practical skills (Tasse & Kim, 2023). This construct can vary greatly from intelligence and is a strong indicator of how well an individual typically functions in everyday life. In contemporary clinical practice adaptive behaviour is an essential component in the formulation of an intellectual disability diagnosis, and must be considered in balance with an individual's cognitive functioning (as assessed through Intellectual Quotient (IQ) assessments).
- Alvares et al. (2019) investigated the relationship between adaptive behaviour, IQ, and age at diagnosis for Autism Spectrum Disorder. They concluded that IQ alone is an imprecise measurement for functional abilities when diagnosing autism, particularly for those without intellectual disability. Furthermore, they recommended that the use of a comprehensive diagnostic evaluation tool that incorporates functional assessments would be beneficial, particularly for funding allocation and service provisioning.
- Functional abilities in children can be assessed through multiple well-validated and reliable assessments, each with their own advantages (Milne et al., 2019; Jeong et al., 2017). The Vineland-3 is sensitive in identifying areas and degrees of support required for young children, while the ABAS-III is a well-validated and reliable test that can be administered by clinicians, teachers, and even parents/carers, presenting significant time and cost savings.

Adaptive Behaviour
Assessment System III

Vineland-3

Participation and
Environment Measure- for
Children and Youth

Pediatric Evaluation of
Disability Inventory
Computer Adaptive Test

Response to Intervention

- The Response to Intervention (RTI) approach is an additional tool that can be used to determine the academic needs of a student with intellectual disability. Although not a formal means of ID diagnosis, there is strong evidence for the validity of learning disability classification based on intervention responses (Fletcher & Miciak, 2019). This tends to be an early means of identification and differentiates whether achievement weaknesses at school are potentially due to alternate factors such as bullying, mental health challenges, home environment, inadequate study or lack of sleep.
- This approach is limited in that it excludes high ability students with a learning disability from accessing specialist education.

Research Significance

A growing school of thought to assess an individual's intellectual capacity is to look at adaptive behaviour and functional needs. There is a wide range of assessments used to evaluate functional needs with proven validity and reliability. Different assessments offer a range of advantages, and offer clinicians and educators the opportunity to implement an approach that meets the needs of individual students.

Alvares, G. A., Bebbington, K., Cleary, D., Evans, K., Glasson, E. J., Maybery, M. T., Pillar, S., Uljarević, M., Varcin, K., Wray, J., & Whitehouse, A. J. (2019). The misnomer of 'high functioning autism': Intelligence is an imprecise predictor of functional abilities at diagnosis. *Autism*, 24(1), 221-232. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1362361319852831>, Dupuis, A., Moon, M.J., Brian, J. et al. Concurrent Validity of the ABAS-II Questionnaire with the Vineland II Interview for Adaptive Behavior in a Pediatric ASD Sample: High Correspondence Despite Systematically Lower Scores. *J Autism Dev Disord* 51, 1417–1427 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-020-04597-y>, Fletcher, J. M., & Miciak, J. (2019). The Identification of Specific Learning Disabilities: A Summary of Research on Best Practices. Austin, TX: Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk., Jeong, Y., Law, M., Stratford, P., DeMatteo, C., & Missiuna, C. (2017). Measuring Participation of Children and Environmental Factors at Home, School, and in Community: Construct Validation of the Korean PEM-CY. *Physical & Occupational Therapy in Pediatrics*, 37(5), 541–554. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01942638.2017.1280870>, Milne, S., Campbell, L., & Cottier, C. (2019). Accurate assessment of functional abilities in pre-schoolers for diagnostic and funding purposes: A comparison of the Vineland-3 and the PEDI-CAT. *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal*, 67(1), 31–38. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1440-1630.12619>, Tassé, M. J., & Kim, M. (2023). Examining the Relationship between Adaptive Behavior and Intelligence. *Behavioral Sciences*, 13, 252. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs13030252>

Diagnostic assessments: Considerations when selecting assessment measures

The DSM-5-TR (text revision) stresses multi-domain considerations when diagnosing intellectual disability, with the breadth of available evidence affirming that IQ assessments should be accompanied by assessments of adaptive behaviour and a consideration of behavioural observations. However, it is important to note that there are a number of key factors for clinicians to consider when selecting assessment tools to measure neuropsychological abilities beyond validity and reliability.

High-level summary of facts and key themes

Assessment Tools

D'Arcy et al. (2022) examined the key attributes that Australian clinicians consider when choosing a tool to assess the functioning of children with neurodevelopmental conditions. The major themes that they identified are outlined below.

Easy	Ease of use in relation to administration, scoring and interpretation
Feasible	Feasibility of use, cost of the tool, and time in administering, scoring, and interpreting the tool
Fair	Inter-rater reliability to maintain consistency and fairness when administered by different professionals
Holistic	Ability to assess a child's functioning in enough detail and capture the needs of parents/carers
Useful	Alignment to the DSM-5-TR and translation to clinically useful goals and considerations

Importantly, it should be noted that this work assessed the perspectives of clinicians delivering assessments rather than the students and parents/carers experiencing them and therefore it provides limited insight for the development of a person-centred approach, although clinicians are often mindful of the experiences of students and parents/carers.

Experience of testing on children and their parents/carers

- The testing process for children can be stressful and anxiety-provoking, especially when they are aware that the results could affect their education and support services. There is a volume of literature on the emotional impact of high stakes testing on children and their parents/carers (Au, 2022; Cho & Chan, 2020).

Research Significance

Victoria's current eligibility criteria prescribes specific assessment tools and score outputs for certain disability categories. Clinicians using their own discretion in assessment tools may mean assessments are not accepted as evidence for an eligibility determination for enrolment at a Victorian Specialist School. It was investigated whether these assessments prescribed are practical and aligned to clinical best practice. It was found that there are a wide range of factors that clinicians must consider when selecting appropriate assessments for the formulation of a diagnosis. For this reason, it is important that clinicians are able to exercise their judgement to enable an appropriately flexible and truly person-centred approach to diagnostic assessment.

Au, W. (2022). *Unequal By Design: High-Stakes Testing and the Standardization of Inequality* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003005179>. Cho, E. Y.-N., & Chan, T. M. S. (2020). Children's wellbeing in a high-stakes testing environment: The case of Hong Kong. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 109, 104694. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104694>. D'Arcy, E., Evans, K., Afsharnejad, B., Milbourn, B., Bölte, S., & Girdler, S. (2022). Australian Clinicians' Considerations When Choosing an Assessment of Functioning Tool for Children with Neurodevelopmental Conditions. *Adv Neurodev Disord* 6, 420–425 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41252-022-00292-4>. D'Arcy, E., Evans, K., Afsharnejad, B., Milbourn, B., Bölte, S., & Girdler, S. (2023). Assessing functioning for individuals with neurodevelopmental conditions: Current clinical practice in Australia. *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal*, 70(1), 43–60. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1440-1630.12834>

Transitions: Parent/carer decision making in selecting schools

Parents/carers have a pivotal role to play in choosing the appropriate school to meet their child's needs, however this process involves balancing multiple considerations and is often particularly difficult when their child has a disability.

High-level summary of facts and key themes

Freedom of choice

- A variety of studies support the notion that parents/carers face many constraints in their choice of schools such as income, information, and transportation (Bell, 2009; Mann et al., 2015). Mann et al. (2015) concluded that final school selections did not accurately reflect the parents/carers' first preference.
- School selection pressures are increased for parents/carers of children with disability. There is often an increased parenting burden that comes from providing assistance in activities of daily living, managing complex behaviours, arranging and coordinating supports, and worrying about the future. This places a significant cognitive load on parents/carers and can make decision-making more difficult, particularly when their decisions will likely have a significant impact on the quality of life of themselves and their children (Tadema & Vlaskamp, 2010).
- Mann et al., (2015) investigated parents/carers' decision-making for children when specialist schools were an option in Queensland, and found parents/carers typically felt that their options were constrained.

Wellbeing impact on parents/carers

- Parental decision making can be heavily affected by anxiety or stress when children are diagnosed with intellectual disability. In such cases parents/carers are often directed to specialist schools and are discouraged from enrolling in inclusive mainstream schools, with the perceived beliefs of teachers about the benefits of segregated education often strongly influencing them. (Mann et al., 2018).

Positive teacher-parent/carer partnerships

- Positive teacher-parent/carer partnerships are a key driver for successful student outcomes. Mann et al., (2024) found that informal and small daily interactions as opposed to formal large stakeholder meetings are foundational for effective partnerships, demonstrating the value of parent-teacher relationships. Similarly, warm greetings, casual discussions, welcoming body language, open-door/approachable policies, regular email updates and relaxed interactions are crucial to useful partnerships.
- Parent-teacher partnerships thrive on a solution-focused approach, positive communication, and teacher's real interest in the child. Mann et al., (2024) found that parents/carers value teachers seeing their child for them, rather than their disability.
- Collaboration impacts partnerships, with parents/carers appreciating teachers asking for their input and thoughts (Mann et al., 2024).

Research Significance

Parents/carers often initiate the enrolment process by choosing to seek out a specialist school for their child with disability. This review has sought to determine drivers behind parent/carer choice in relation to specialist education. The research outlined that parents/carers of students with disability face a difficult process when determining the right educational setting for their child, which often results in them being unsatisfied with their decisions. This highlights the needs for parents/carers to be supported and provided with enough clear information to make a well-informed choice.

Mann, G., Cuskelly, M., & Moni, K. (2015). Choosing a school: parental decision-making when special schools are an option. *Disability and Society*, 30(9), pp. 1413-1427.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2015.1108182>,
Mann, G., Gilmore, L., Robertson, A., Kennedy-Wood, L., & Maia-Pike, L. (2024). Little things mean a lot: parent perspectives on positive teacher-parent communication when students have disability. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 30(1), pp.102-115.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2023.2241020>, Tadema, A. C., & Vlaskamp, C. (2010). The time and effort in taking care for children with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities: a study on care load and support. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 38(1), pp. 41-48.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-3156.2009.00561.x>

Transitions: Choice to transfer students from mainstream to specialist schools

There are a wide range of reasons that parents/carers might choose to move their children from mainstream to specialist schools, including the complex needs of students, class sizes, limited teacher knowledge, children's age, difficulty in regular schools, and limited systemic support (Mann et al., 2018). Mann et al. (2018) reported parents/carers felt they had control of the decision to leave the mainstream schooling.

High-level summary of facts and key themes

Reasons for leaving mainstream schools

Mann et al. (2018) found the following factors were key influences for parents/carers choosing a transfer from mainstream to specialist schooling.

- **Learning barriers:** children almost universally experienced learning barriers in the mainstream school, to different extents, leading to their parents/carers deciding to leave the mainstream system. Typically, parents/carers would also report a lack of provision for children's academic learning.
- **Emotional strain:** Emotional strain experienced by parents/carers and children contributed to the decision to leave mainstream schooling
- **Alienating culture:** Alienating school culture led parents/carers to move children from mainstream schools into specialist schools
- **Authority Figure:** Two-thirds of participants reported that an authority figure advised them to leave their mainstream school.

Hope for specialist schools

- The more difficult the mainstream school experience, the higher the expectations of the specialist school. There is a correlation between learning barriers in mainstream schools and wellbeing hopes for the specialist school, thus warning of the emotional impact parents/carers experience when learning is not supported (Mann et al., 2018).
- Mann et al. (2018) found that parents/carers consider various factors when making decisions about specialist schools for their children with disability, and no single factor is prioritised above others, highlighting the complex nature of schooling choices. Contrastingly, different studies have found that factors such as a school's atmosphere, caring approach to students, and class size are often more important to parents/carers than factors like educational standards, exam results, and having siblings at the same school (Satherley & Norwich, 2021). These findings demonstrate the wide range of factors that parents/carers consider when making important decisions about their child's education.

Child's characteristics

- In Mann et al. (2018), the most common age children transferred to specialist schools from mainstream schools was 11 years, around the time parents/carers begin to consider secondary education.

Research Significance

Drivers behind parent/carer choice to transfer students from mainstream to specialist schools is relevant to this review as it can inform enrolments and specialist school capacity numbers. There are a wide range of factors that influence parents/carers' decisions to transfer their children from mainstream schooling to a specialist school. Many of these factors relate to extra-educational experiences and are not tied to schooling outcomes, indicating that the demand for specialist schools is influenced by the extent to which mainstream schools can offer truly inclusive experiences. It is important to note that some parents/carers may choose to transition their child from a specialist school to a mainstream school, however the literature identified did not investigate the drivers behind this choice.

Mann, G., Cuskelly, M., & Moni, K. (2018). An investigation of parents' decisions to transfer children from regular to special schools.. *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities*, 15(3), pp. 183-192.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/jppi.12238> , Satherley, D., & Norwich, B. (2022). Parents' experiences of choosing a special school for their children. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 37(6), 950–964.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2021.1967298>

Transitions: Student experiences of school transition

Transitions between schools mark a critical milestone in a student's educational journey. Studies have indicated that the difficulties often experienced during this transition are primarily attributed to adjustments in social dynamics and adapting to new learning environments. Students with additional education needs experience additional barriers to their peers (McCoy et al., 2019).

High-level summary of facts and key themes

Transition experiences

- Students with specialised education needs are more likely to experience a negative transition to secondary school. In particular, students with intellectual and learning disabilities are three times more likely to experience a poor transition (McCoy et al., 2019). This risk continues to increase for female students and lower socio-economic groups.
- Autistic students tend to begin their education in a specialist school and transition to mainstream education after a process of skill development (Martin et al., 2019).

Best practice transition of students between specialist and mainstream schools

- There is a need for collaboration between the schools that a student is transitioning between, as well as a review of the support models that are provided to them, to ensure that students with high needs receive the support they require (Forlin & Deppeler, 2022; Martin et al., 2019).
- Pre-transition preparation and adoption of appropriate strategies in the receiving school are factors which also facilitate a successful transition (Martin et al., 2019).
- Students report a need for assistance in managing their physical environment and building positive relationships with teachers and specialist needs staff during their transition (Pitt et al., 2019).
- Fontil et al. (2020) discussed the benefit of moving away from child-centred and professional-centred to family-centred models of care in which parents/carers are respected as experts on their child. In this model a smooth transition is facilitated by teachers who empower parents/carers to be advocates for their child's needs in their school, whether that is a mainstream or specialist environment.

Research Significance

Transitioning between specialist and mainstream schools (and vice versa) can often be a stressful experience for parents/carers, with close collaboration required between all involved schools to guarantee adequate support is provided. Understanding the experience of school transition for students with disability or high support needs can inform how Victoria can manage the transition experience between mainstream and specialist schools.

Fontil, L., Gittens, J., Beaudoin, E. et al. (2020). Barriers to and Facilitators of Successful Early School Transitions for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders and Other Developmental Disabilities: A Systematic Review. *J Autism Dev Disord* 50, 1866–1881. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-019-03938-w>, Forlin, C. and Deppeler, J. (2022). "Transitioning from Special Schools or Settings into Inclusive Schools: Expectations and Realities for Students with Complex Needs", Scorgie, K. and Forlin, C. (Ed.) *Transition Programs for Children and Youth with Diverse Needs (International Perspectives on Inclusive Education, Vol. 18)*, Emerald Publishing Limited, Bingley, pp. 77-90. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S1479-36362020000018007>, Martin, T., Dixon, R., Verenikina, I., & Costley, D. (2021). Transitioning primary school students with Autism Spectrum Disorder from a special education setting to a mainstream classroom: successes and difficulties. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 25(5), 640–655. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2019.1568597>, McCoy, S., Shevlin, M., & Rose, R. (2019). Secondary school transition for students with special educational needs in Ireland. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 35(2), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2019.1628338>, Pitt, F., Dixon, R., & Vialle, W. (2021). The transition experiences of students with disabilities moving from primary to secondary schools in NSW, Australia. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 25(7), 779–794. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2019.1572797>

Centralisation: Centralised v decentralised decision making

Although there is a paucity of literature directly exploring the benefits of centralised versus decentralised decision-making process regarding student eligibility for specialist schools, the available literature that examines general decision-making still offers some useful insights. This literature suggests that localised decision-making processes led by schools assist to establish accountability and promote effective courses of action (Cornito, 2021). This finding suggests that if school-based management was implemented at specialist schools in Victoria, there may be increased efficiencies and improved relationships between the school and its parents/carers and students.

High-level summary of facts and key themes

The balance between centralisation and decentralisation in education

- School-based management (SBM) is a bottom-up approach to educational planning that uses resources relevant to the school's teaching and learning process. SBM has been shown to increase efficient use of resources, quality of education, and the establishment of an open and welcoming school.
- Within SBM, there is greater participation from stakeholders in decision-making processes which can improve relationships, learning outcomes, and student performance (Cornito, 2021). Cornito (2021) notes schools can be empowered through the "right blend" of centralised and decentralised decision making.

Inclusivity and community benefits of localised decision making

- Bal et al. (2019) found that during school transformations, a bottom-up approach in which parents/carers, teachers, administrators, community members, and researchers collaborate, produces results that are far more inclusive of racial, cultural, and socio-economic diversity.

Research Significance

Localised decision-making processes that foster school autonomy can result in collaborative environments that promote inclusivity and efficiency. However, a mixed model that offers a blend of centralised consistency and local autonomy is likely to offer the best outcomes and ensure efforts are aligned towards a clear goal.

These findings can be applied to the decision-making processes regarding specialist school enrolment and eligibility determinations at the department's central, regional and school level – where the central and regional arms hold a majority of the decision-making power. The research suggests that Victoria may look at balancing the local perspectives more when determining a student's specialist school enrolment and eligibility.

Bal, A., Afacan, K. & Cakir, H.I. Transforming Schools from the Ground-Up with Local Stakeholders: Implementing Learning Lab for Inclusion and Systemic Transformation at a Middle School. *Interchange* 50, 359–387 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10780-019-09353-5>.
Cornito, C. M. (2021). Striking a balance between centralized and decentralized decision making: A school-based management practice for optimum performance. *International Journal on Social and Education Sciences (IJonSES)*, 3(4), 656-669. <https://doi.org/10.46328/ijonSES.217>.



Appendix 3 Jurisdictional scan

Appendix 3: Jurisdictional scan

We engaged with key stakeholders to discuss approaches to specialist school eligibility criteria and processes across Australian and international jurisdictions. Four Eastern-Australian states were examined as part of this review due to their similarities to Victoria in legislative environment, principles and history of specialist education system and demographics. Countries included in the jurisdictional scan were identified and considered due to the comparability with Victoria, this included legislative environment and context, specialist education systems funded and managed by the states or local governments and shared principles of inclusion and parent/carer choice.

Australian Jurisdictions



International Jurisdictions



Federal jurisdictions: New South Wales



Known as Schools for Specific Purposes (SSP), New South Wales's (NSW) specialist schools support students with moderate to high learning and support needs. Compared to Victoria, NSW has a higher proportion of support classrooms in mainstream schools, though the eligibility criteria and enrolment is the same for SSPs and support classrooms.

Overview of system

- ▶ Proportion of students at specialist schools: 3%**.
- ▶ 2% of students attend specialist classrooms in mainstream schools.
- ▶ School Types: mainstream, mainstream with specialist classrooms and SSPs*.
- ▶ Eligibility based on blend of diagnostic assessment and functional needs.

*SSPs may not be directly comparable to Victoria's specialist schools as SSPs can include juvenile justice schools and hospital schools.

**Note that data quoted was provided by jurisdictions during consultation.

Eligibility Criteria

For a student to be eligible in NSW for SSP they must have a diagnosis of a disability which fits into certain disability categories. The criteria in NSW use a wider number of disability categories than Victoria. This includes intellectual disability, physical disability, hearing impairment, vision impairment, deaf, blind, autism, mental health problems, learning difficulties and behavioural disorder.

NSW requires the same clinical professionals to provide evidence of a child's disability and learning needs that Victoria does.

Enrolment process

Parents/carers initiate the enrolment process for Schools for Specific Purposes (SSP) through an application for placement. Applications for placement are through the Access Request process, this is arranged by the learning and support team at the student's local public school. A student is offered enrolment in a SSP through a placement panel process. A student's eligibility is determined through the department's eligibility criteria as well as the availability of a place in an appropriate support class.

Enrolment arrangements for students with disability and additional learning and support needs are the same as for all other students. This process requires parents/carers to arrange a meeting with the local government (mainstream) school. The parents/carer fills out an application to enrol in a NSW mainstream school form, which the school processes.

Reviews and renewals of enrolment can occur for SSPs and support classrooms, they consider aspects of a student's individual learning and support, including whether the current placement is meeting the student's learning and support needs. In line with best practice, NSW does not require ongoing assessments of lifelong conditions such as ASD more than every two years. Secondly the review process enables flexibility in that there is no compulsory number of reviews or reassessments required, this means that clinical judgement can be applied to the specific situation of the student. For example, a child assessed at age 5 should have their eligibility reassessed as their needs may change throughout their schooling life.

Relevance to Victoria

When determining student eligibility for specialist schools, in cases where students have multiple diagnoses, NSW 'prioritises' the condition which has the greatest impact on educational outcomes. This appears to correspond to Victoria's eligibility determinations based on 'primary' diagnoses, however in NSW specific consideration is also given to co-morbid diagnoses. By incorporating a consideration of students' comorbid diagnoses in Victoria's eligibility criteria would mean student needs are considered holistically. The provision of support process (enrolment process) in NSW places mainstream schools at the centre of the process. The intention behind the policy and process is that support is provided within a mainstream school. The discussions regarding the decision for a student to be placed in an SSP area if the student needs adjustments outside of what the mainstream school can offer, rather than if the student meets the threshold for eligibility for a specialist school. Currently the process to seek additional education support in Victoria can be situated at mainstream and specialist schools in Victoria. If mainstream schools are the centre of the process in Victoria, it may encourage mainstream schools to take further steps towards inclusion of students with disability.

Federal jurisdictions: Queensland



Queensland's specialist education system is primarily designed to support students with intellectual disability. The eligibility threshold for specialist schools is the presence of an intellectual disability, alone or in combination with other disabilities, which 'severely' impact the student's ability to attend and learn from mainstream schooling.

Overview of system

- ▶ Proportion of students at specialist schools: 5%.
- ▶ School Types: mainstream, specialist schools.
- ▶ Eligibility based on diagnostic assessment.

Eligibility Criteria

To be eligible for enrolment into a Specialist School in Queensland, the student must fulfill the following criteria:

1. The person has a disability as defined by the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (Commonwealth);
2. The person has a severe disability which includes an intellectual disability;
3. The person is unlikely to attain the levels of development of which the person is capable unless the person receives specialised education;
4. The person's educational program is best delivered in a specialist school taking into account the appropriateness of this placement for the individual concerned.

Enrolment process

Parents/carers initiate the process to enrol into a specialist school in Queensland, they are required to contact the regional office of the department of Education to be put in touch with a regional officer. This officer will provide them with advice and support to gather information and complete the necessary forms to submit an enrolment application.

However, there is a separate process to verify a student's intellectual disability category. There is a verification process through an Education Adjustment Program where a departmental verifier assesses the student's intellectual disability.

After submitting an enrolment application, the principal of the school nominated by the parents/carers will review the application, assess the student's eligibility and complete a principal referral form if the student meets all enrolment requirements. In the referral, the principal recommends that enrolment should be approved for the student.

The enrolment application and principal referral is then provided to the department's Senior Guidance Officer who assesses the information. This individual is responsible for deciding whether to approve the application, after which the chosen school processes the student's enrolment.

Relevance to Victoria

In Queensland, once a student has been found to be eligible for enrolment in a specialist school, they are guaranteed enrolment for the duration of their schooling, with no mandated reviews. This significantly reduces the stress and burden placed on students and parents/carers and provides an alternative to Victoria's system of mandated reviews.

In Queensland, once a student's application for a specialist school enrolment has been successful, the relevant principal will inform the parents/carer of the outcome. In cases where the application has been unsuccessful, the parents/carer is notified by the department in order to maintain the relationship between the parents/carer and school. This is particularly useful in cases where parents/carers re-apply for eligibility at a later date and could offer a useful model to Victoria.

Queensland requires that clinicians use validated and reliable assessments when diagnosing students with intellectual disability but does not mandate which ones are used. This allows for clinicians to exercise their judgement of which assessments are most appropriate for individual children and reduces the risk that students will need to be re-assessed. This may improve the experience of parents, carers and students, and offers an alternative model to Victoria's approach, which requires clinicians to use recommended assessments.

Federal jurisdictions: South Australia



The Inclusive Education Support Program (IESP) is a functional needs-based funding model for students with disability. The IESP replaced the former Disability Support Program (DSP) in 2019 to provide financial support to specialist schools in South Australia. This change was accompanied by a change in the specialist school eligibility criteria, which were updated to remove significant administrative burden for schools, allowing for more time to be allocated to planning around the capabilities and needs of students.

The updated eligibility criteria for the IESP focus on student's needs in addition to a disability diagnosis. The IESP recognises all disabilities and learning difficulties, including mental health, trauma, complex behaviours, and complex health needs. A personalised learning plan is required under the IESP, meaning students receive tailored support for their needs.

Overview of system

- ▶ Proportion of specialist schools within South Australian government school system: 3.9%.
- ▶ School Types: mainstream, specialist classes in mainstream schools, disability units within mainstream schools, and specialist schools.
- ▶ Eligibility based on functional needs (however intellectual disability diagnosis required).

Eligibility Criteria

To be eligible for a IESP in South Australia, a student must have a diagnosed intellectual disability by a department of Education Guidance Officer (Psychologist) and a Special Educator through a panel process to attend a Special School. For Special Classes, Disability Units and Classrooms a student must have a global developmental delay or an intellectual disability diagnosis.

Specifically, an intellectual disability diagnosis requires full scale scores on cognitive assessments of 70 plus or minus 5 and an Adaptive behaviour assessment resulting in two standard deviations below the mean, and a neuro-developmental diagnosis. Furthermore, South Australia uses a functional needs matrix to recommend what school options are most suitable for the student with disability. The functional areas assessed include language and communication, social independence, personal care as well as others.

In addition to eligibility for IESP, there are suitability guidelines which determine a student's eligibility for a specialist school, specialist classroom and disability unit. These considerations include whether the specialist schooling provision meets the parents/carer's needs, and whether the low scores be attributed to another factor such as a neuro developmental disorder.

Enrolment process

In South Australia, parents/carers initiate the enrolment process by approaching their chosen school. Principals initiate and guide parents/carers through specialist school application process.

Once the school initiates the enrolment process with the parents/carers, a referral is initiated which starts an education pathway investigation led by the department of Education's psychologists and school services who undertake assessments of the student. When results of assessments are complete, an Education Regional Panel is held with parents/carers, specialist school principal and school staff to discuss the results, next steps and school options. Suitability considerations are also incorporated into this discussion.

Following the panel with parents/carers, an enrolment application is submitted, where the department's local education offices make a decision on the enrolment outcome. To ensure consistency across the state, different education offices will assess the same application for discrepancies and inconsistencies.

Relevance to Victoria

South Australia's updated processes and criteria for specialist school enrolment highlight the trend towards assessing students on functional needs alongside a diagnosis of a disability. Victoria may benefit from key learnings from South Australia's shift towards a functional needs view of specialist school eligibility.

Additionally, the incorporation of suitability considerations by South Australia ensures that specialist school placement is practical and meets parents/carers' needs. This may be a factor Victoria considers in student placements at specialist schools in order to have a holistic view of the student and their parent's/carer's situation.

In South Australia, assessments for disability are completed by the department's psychologists and school services. South Australia reduces the cost barrier to access assessments necessary for specialist school enrolment. Similarly, Victoria provides assessments for intellectual disability funded by the department.

Federal jurisdictions: Australian Capital Territory



The Australian Capital Territory's (ACT) specialist schools educate students with high and complex needs, moderate to profound intellectual disability, and intellectual disability with a comorbid diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder.

Despite having diagnostic-based criteria to determine eligibility for specialist schooling, the ACT enrolment process includes a Student-Centred Appraisal of Need (SCAN) which is used to determine the educational needs of individual students and the associated additional resources or support they may require. During the SCAN processes there is a meeting between parents/carers, the principal, a classroom teacher, the school psychologist and an ACT Education Directorate Moderator. The meeting allows for parents/carers to contribute to the educational program of their child, and as such functions similarly to Victoria's Student Support Groups.

Overview of system

- ▶ Proportion of specialist schools in government school system in the ACT: 3.6%.
- ▶ School types: mainstream and specialist schools.
- ▶ Eligibility based on diagnostic assessment.

Eligibility Criteria

To be eligible in the ACT, a student must fulfill the following criteria:

- ▶ a student must have a moderate to profound intellectual disability; or
- ▶ moderate to profound intellectual disability with a co-occurring diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder.

These diagnoses largely correspond with Victoria's criteria. However, in the ACT, there must be evidence of impairment to the student's functioning as a result of the disability. As a result, the evidence provided by clinicians must demonstrate that the student needs significant or extensive adjustments to access the curriculum.

The ACT's eligibility criteria outlines that the diagnostic and classification tools that clinicians use are aligned with the most current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) or the International and Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD-10).

Enrolment process

A school psychologist, with parent/carer consent, completes the Disability Education Program Application (DEPA) when applying for funding to support the student to enrol into a specialist school.

Once a student's eligibility for specialist schools has been confirmed by a school psychologist, parents/carers are required to submit an online enrolment application to a specialist school.

The school's Disability Education Coordination Officer (DECO) can support parents/carers to understand their child's eligibility to enrol at the school.

Once completed, DEPAs are reviewed by the ACT Education Directorate and a decision is made regarding the student's eligibility, after which an offer of placement is made to the parents and/or carers.

Relevance to Victoria

In the ACT, parents and/or carers are supported through the specialist school enrolment process by a school psychologist, who discusses how a specialist school can offer supports and completes the enrolment application on their behalf. This means that parents/carers are supported throughout the journey of enrolment to a specialist school and reduces the administrative burden on parents/carers to navigate the enrolment process.

Victorian parents/carers struggle to navigate the education system for their child with a disability, especially if the student is found to be ineligible for their chosen specialist school. Victoria could consider implementing a similar case management role to support parents/carers in navigating the specialist school enrolment process and ease the burden placed upon them. It is important to note that the ACT has a significantly smaller population, and a smaller student population than Victoria and comparisons between the states are limited due to this.

International jurisdictions: United Kingdom



The United Kingdom (UK) offers Special Education Needs (SEN) mainstream schools that provide specialised provisions within mainstream settings, and SEN Schools, also known as Special Schools, that are designed to support students with specific functional needs such as a physical disability. The majority of children with specialised education needs are educated in mainstream schools, however SEN schools make up 9% of all schools in the UK. SEN schools cater to about a third of students with specialised education needs. Local government organisations are responsible for overseeing the assessment of a child's eligibility for specialist schools that cater to students with high needs.

Overview of system

- ▶ Proportion of students at specialist schools: 2.8%.
- ▶ School Types: SEN mainstream schools, specialist schools.
- ▶ Eligibility based on functional needs.

Eligibility Criteria

To be eligible in the UK, a student must meet the functional needs criteria outlined within the needs assessment of an Education Health Care (EHC) plan. In the UK eligibility and assessment varies according to local authority, but an EHC plan is consistently required for enrolment into a SEN school across the UK. The needs assessment within the EHC plan considers the following criteria:

- ▶ wishes and goals of student and their parents and/or carers
- ▶ educational needs of the student
- ▶ health needs of the student (note: information provided should outline the specific needs and challenges experienced by the student)
- ▶ social care needs related to the student's SEN (specialist education needs) or disability. Evidence can be sourced from teachers, youth workers, or social workers
- ▶ potential target educational outcomes for the student
- ▶ specialised educational provision resources required by the student.

Enrolment process

In the UK, parents/carers initiate the process for enrolment into SEN schools. Parents/carers are required to contact the Local Education Authority within their Local government Area to request a needs assessment and determine eligibility for an EHC plan.

Parents/carers must provide their local authority with evidence of their child's academic progress and enrolment to date, and information about the nature, extent and context of their child's needs. This information is reviewed to determine if further assessment is required.

Once any additional assessments have been conducted, the final EHC needs assessment application can be submitted.

After an EHC plan has been approved, a meeting is held between the parents/carers, a local authority representative, and any representatives of the child's health and social care team to discuss the child's provisional needs. A draft version of the EHC plan is shared with parents/carers for review and input, and the final EHC plan includes a recommendation to a school that can meet the needs of students, allowing the child to enrol in it.

Relevance to Victoria

A request for assessment by a Local Education Authority can be made by anyone who thinks it may be necessary, including doctors, health visitors, teachers, parents/carers, and family friends, with the parent/carer's consent. This may reduce the administrative burden placed on parents/carers, and similar provisions could be investigated by Victoria.

A young person can request an eligibility assessment themselves if they're aged 16 to 25, highlighting the agency provided to young people with additional learning needs in the UK. Developing similar provisions in Victoria would ensure students themselves are provided with choice and support those that may have non-'traditional' parents/carer situations.

The UK provides additional support to parents/carers through the SEN Coordinator role in schools, who support parents/carers throughout the specialist school enrolment process. This is another example of a case management role that could be investigated by Victoria.

International jurisdictions: New Zealand



New Zealand's specialist education system is based on the principle of inclusivity, and students are encouraged to attend their local school with the provision of specialised learning support (this includes specialist schools).

New Zealand's Ongoing Resource Scheme (ORS) provides funding for students, and is allocated to two categories of school: mainstream schools that have additional supports for students with low-to-moderate needs, as well as specialist schools that support high and very-high needs students.

Overview of system

- ▶ Proportion of students with ORS funding: 1.3% (as of July 2022)
- ▶ School types: day specialist schools, residential specialist schools, specialist settings in mainstream schools.
- ▶ 31 specialist schools (including 3 residential specialist schools).
- ▶ Eligibility based on functional needs.

Eligibility Criteria

To be eligible in New Zealand for a day specialist school, a student must be ranked as high combined needs or very-high needs as a result of meeting one of the nine eligibility criteria for ORS support. The ORS funding criteria focus on the degree of adaptation or support that the student requires. To illustrate, one of the criteria outlines that "Students need total adaptation of all curriculum content."

To meet the criteria students must have significant educational needs that arise from extreme or severe difficulty with any of the following:

- ▶ learning
- ▶ hearing
- ▶ vision
- ▶ mobility or language use
- ▶ social communication.

New Zealand's eligibility criteria do not require specific diagnoses or diagnostic assessments for a student to access specialised educational needs funding through ORS.

Enrolment process

To enrol in a specialist school in New Zealand, an educator initiates the process. Educators, including teachers or the Special Education Needs Coordinator, are responsible for coordinating a process where the parents/carers, specialists, teachers, and others (who know the student well) provide information about the student's needs. An educator then completes the application form for enrolment.

Once an application is submitted for ORS funding, the application gets assessed by the Ministry of Education. ORS has two verification levels:

- ▶ Very High
- ▶ High including Combined Moderate Ongoing Needs

Three independent verifiers review the ORS application and determine the student's eligibility. If a unanimous decision cannot be made there will be a site visit to observe the child. Applicants can request, in writing, a review of the verifiers' decision within six months of the original application. Reviews only occur when there is additional information about the student's needs.

Relevance to Victoria

New Zealand has a Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCO) role within all schools, which supports parents, carers and schools to support students with specialised education needs. SENCOs can also recommend parents/carers apply for a specialist school. This is another example of a case management role that could be investigated by Victoria.

The New Zealand eligibility verification process considers combined ongoing needs of children without requiring diagnostic thresholds be met. This provides an example of needs-based assessment that may be relevant to Victoria's objective of providing all parents/carers and students with sufficient choice.

Children and their parents/carers receive support if a child is found to be ineligible for enrolment at a specialist school through the Intensive Wraparound Service (IWS). Currently in Victoria, transition funding is available for students transitioning out of specialist school into mainstream schools, however it is reported from consultation that this funding is insufficient to support a student's transition. This may provide useful examples of support provided to students transitioning from specialist to mainstream education, but further investigation through consultation is necessary.

International jurisdictions: Ireland



Ireland uses the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), and the World Health Organisation (WHO) Disability Assessment Schedule to assess disability based on functional assessments, designed to be internationally standardised and easily administered.

Ireland's National Council for Special Education (NCSE) works with the Irish Department of Education to improve the delivery of specialist needs education. The NCSE coordinates, assesses, and reviews resources for children with specialist educational needs, and manages the eligibility of students to enrol in specialist schools.

Overview of system

- ▶ 140 Special Schools in Ireland.
- ▶ Less than 1% of students attend a specialist school.
- ▶ School types: specialist settings at mainstream schools, special schools for students who have a learning disability; schools for visually impaired and hearing impaired students; schools for physical disabilities; specialist schools for emotionally disturbed students.
- ▶ Eligibility based on a blend of functional needs and diagnostic assessment.

Eligibility Criteria

In Ireland, a student must meet one of the following criteria during their Assessment of Need to be eligible to enrol in a specialist school:

- ▶ severe and profound intellectual disability
- ▶ autism with complex needs
- ▶ moderate intellectual disability with additional physical/behavioural disability
- ▶ moderate or severe/profound disability with emotional or behavioural behaviours.

Professional reports are required to determine a child's disability and/or medical condition. A mix of functional needs and diagnostic considerations are included in the professional reports, to ensure the child's care needs are holistically captured.

It is important to note that the Irish eligibility criteria calls for a traditional diagnostic assessment. It is required that an IQ test administered by a psychologist be used to evidence a general learning disability.

Enrolment process

To initiate the process for enrolment in Ireland, parents/carers or personal advocates initiate an Assessment of Need process if a child is known or suspected to have a disability.

The Assessment of Need application requires parents/carers to outline concerns about their child's needs and the services they believe are necessary, and provide reports from health practitioners, social workers, and preschool or school staff. The application is submitted to the Health Service Executive (HSE), which arranges for assessments to be carried out and contacts relevant health and social workers.

HSE assessors determine what health needs arise from a child's disability and identify what services are needed to meet these needs, but do not provide a diagnosis. The NCSE and parents/carers are informed if the assessment finds that the child has additional learning/care needs.

NCSE then provides the parents/carers information so that they can identify suitable local school options. SEN (Special Education Needs) organisers at each school can advise parents/carers and schools on what facilities, services and resources are available for the child. Following this, parents/carers choose a specialist school and enrol.

Relevance to Victoria

Ireland has a National Educational Psychological Service, where psychologists work in partnership with teachers, parents/carers, and students in identifying educational needs of students. Additionally, Ireland has SEN Organisers at each school that can liaise with the school, the HSE and other services.

Compared to Victoria, Ireland appears to have greater support roles in place for parents/carers with children with specialised education needs to identify the child's needs and educational support options.

International jurisdictions: Ontario, Canada



Canada is working towards a vision of inclusive education where all students can be educated together in common learning environments. Due to the focus on inclusive education, students in Canada are encouraged to attend mainstream schools which can provide additional support to students. The processes and eligibility criteria used to determine specialist school eligibility can vary between different regional jurisdictions.

In Ontario, a southern province in Canada, most students with disability and additional needs attend mainstream schools and classrooms. The only separate schools offered for exceptional pupils (students with special educational needs) are 'Demonstration Schools', which offer a one-year, high-intensity academic intervention program placement for students with a learning disability.

Overview of system

- ▶ Average number of students with disabilities per mainstream class was 16.3%.
- ▶ Mainstream school settings for specialised learning needs students: mainstream class, mainstream with resource assistance and mainstream class with portion of time spent with specialist education teacher or part time/full time special education class.
- ▶ Schools for children with special learning needs: demonstration schools and provincial school for students who are deaf, blind, or deafblind.
- ▶ Eligibility based on functional needs.

Eligibility Criteria

To be eligible for additional learning support in Ontario, a student must be determined as 'exceptional'. A student is exceptional if they have behavioural, communicational, intellectual, physical or multiple exceptionalities that require a special education program or services. At mainstream schools, the school board is the decision maker on whether a child is determined as 'exceptional' and what learning support the student receives at the school. An Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) set up by a school board decides if the student should be identified as exceptional, decides an appropriate placement for the student, and reviews a student's identification and placement at least once in each school year.

To be eligible for a Demonstration School in Ontario, a student candidate must have a severe learning disability diagnosis. Additionally, a psychologist or other mental health professional must determine that the student does not require treatment for emotional or behavioural needs that would restrict the student's ability to fully participate in the demonstration school program.

Enrolment process

In Ontario, principals or parents/carers initiate the process to receive additional support for the student. The principal of the school or the students' parents/carers refer the student to the school board's IPRC to initiate additional support at a mainstream school. An assessment of exceptional students takes place, including formal assessment, such as standardised testing, and informal assessment, such as classroom assessment techniques that gauge students' learning progress. The IPRC considers the health or psychological assessments conducted by a qualified practitioner, interviews the student and considers the information submitted by parents/carers (or student if over 16 years of age).

For enrolment into a Demonstration School, initially parents/carers approach the school to discuss the student's profile and academic history. Secondly the school assessment of the student's eligibility takes place, the school reviews information shared by the parents/carers which includes the student's record, academic history, or supporting documents from support services staff. Finally, the school develops a formal application on behalf of the student and presents this to the Provincial Committee on Learning Disabilities. This Committee assesses the application for the student to receive support through a placement at a demonstration school program.

Relevance to Victoria

In Ontario, local school boards have the autonomy to determine the learning needs of a student, and how these needs may be met. This model may ensure that students receive a more tailored educational experience that can flexibly adapt to changing needs. This provides an example of a school-led system that contrasts with Victoria's model and may provide insight to the level of autonomy that can be granted to schools.

International jurisdictions: Switzerland



In Switzerland, students are supported to attend mainstream schools in specialist education classrooms, but also have access to specialist schools, mirroring Victorian principles. Like in Australia, specialist education in Switzerland is managed by the states/cantons.

Switzerland offers a range of schools that are designed to cater to students with learning and psychological disabilities, physical disability, or visual impairment. Mainstream schools also offer support to students with specialised needs, such as educational therapeutic services, language therapy, and psychomotor therapy.

Overview of system

- ▶ 4.5% of students received support for specialist educational needs.
- ▶ 1.8% of students go to a specialist school.
- ▶ 4.4% of schools in Switzerland are specialist needs schools.
- ▶ School Types: Mainstream, integrative, specialist needs Classes, Special needs Schools – including severe learning or psychological difficulties schools for physical disability and school for visually impaired.
- ▶ Eligibility based on functional needs.

Eligibility Criteria

To be eligible for enrolment to a specialist school in Switzerland, a student is assessed based on a standardised evaluation procedure that considers the functional needs of children, rather than any diagnostic or impairment-based criteria.

There are specific agencies in the cantons (including school psychological services) that provide case evaluation, diagnosis, guidance counselling and treatment to support the assessment and enrolment processes for enrolment to specialist needs schools.

Enrolment process

In Switzerland, applications for enrolment to specialist needs schools are initiated by teachers, physicians, special services (e.g. school psychological services), school authorities and guardianship authorities.

Specialist needs schooling is offered after an application, and an evaluation of the case and an admittance decision is finalised.

Relevance to Victoria

Starting in January 2011, Switzerland was one of the first countries to implement a multidimensional, context-sensitive assessment and process to establish eligibility in education systems. This new eligibility procedure is based on the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health developed by the World Health Organisation. By contrast, Victoria's assessment and eligibility determination for specialist schools are based on the older DSM-IV which was released in 1994.

Switzerland also uses functional needs rather than any diagnostic or impairment-based assessments to determine specialist school eligibility criteria, comparably Victoria's eligibility criteria emphasises diagnostic assessments.

International jurisdictions: Massachusetts, United States



The *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* is a federal law which entitles every student in the US to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). To ensure a FAPE for students with specialised educational needs the local educational agency and parents/carers work together to determine placement and program modification to support students. In most of the US, “extremely” high-needs students are eligible for specialist schooling; most students with specialised education needs are provided support within mainstream classrooms or a separate classroom within a mainstream school. If a student has a severe health condition or is unable to attend school for another reason, they will receive some kind of specialist education support at home.

The percentage of students receiving specialist education services varies from 6% to 15% between different states in the U.S., largely due to significant differences in eligibility criteria.

Overview of system

- ▶ 13% of all students receive some kind of specialist education services in the US.
- ▶ The proportion of specialist schools in Massachusetts is 0.6%.
- ▶ Massachusetts school types: mainstream schools with inclusive classrooms, specialist schools including deaf schools.
- ▶ Eligibility based on diagnostic assessment.

Eligibility Criteria

To be eligible in Massachusetts as well as for the rest of the US, the student must be classified within one of 13 categories which are largely diagnostic in nature. The categories include learning disability, speech or language impairment, multiple disabilities, autism, deafness, and blindness.

Enrolment process

To initiate enrolment in a specialist school in Massachusetts, parents/carers must request a referral for evaluation from their local school district. The school district will then initiate an evaluation of the child’s education strengths and needs for the development of an Individualised Education Program (IEP).

The IEP contains information gathered from a range of professionals and outlines yearly goals for the student, which determine their school placements, program modifications, testing accommodations, counselling, and other specialist services required to meet their needs.

Parents/carers are equal participants in the process of developing an IEP, and are members of the IEP team (the Team) alongside the child’s mainstream school teachers, specialist education teachers, other individuals or agencies invited by the parent/carer or school district, and someone to interpret evaluation results if required. The Team determines if a child is eligible for enrolment in a specialist school.

The child’s placement in a specialist school is usually reviewed in an annual assessment of eligibility, based on the student’s IEP. The placement also tries to ensure the school is close in proximity to the student’s home.

Relevance to Victoria

In the US, all evaluations required to determine a student’s eligibility for specialist schooling are provided by the school system, with no cost to the parents/carers. This is similar for intellectual disability assessments for specialist school eligibility determinations in Victoria which is provided at no cost to parents/carers by the external evaluation service,



Appendix 4 Specialist Enrolment Policy Review Findings Report 2021

Excerpt from Specialist Enrolment Policy Review Findings Report 2021

In November 2021, the department undertook a review of enrolment criteria, policies and practices for specialist schools and settings to strengthen and consolidate the department's approach to enrolment management of Victorian government specialist schools. Although this report is distinct from the specialist school eligibility review, there were a range of relevant discoveries and conclusions that reinforce the findings and recommendations of this review.

The enrolment policy review highlighted inconsistency and complexity in eligibility criteria and enrolment processes

- ▶ “There was some inconsistency between respondents’ understanding of eligibility criteria and evidence requirements. Some respondents provided separate eligibility criteria and evidence requirements, while others did not distinguish between these two mechanisms” (Source: Page 6).
- ▶ “Similarly, there was some inconsistency between reported eligibility criteria and the criteria outlined in the enrolment policy. For example, one school reported that they are a dual mode school (catering for students with mild to profound ID) but their enrolment policy on their website states the school is for students with a mild ID (IQ score between 50 and 70)” (Source: Page 6).
- ▶ “There is a high degree of complexity around the provision of education to students with disability and the processes to address this complexity varied between the jurisdictions reviewed. In Victoria, there is a clear need to align policy with practice to remove or reduce barriers to accessing quality education for students with disability which can have a profound and lasting impact on their lives and the lives of their parents/carers” (Source: Page 5).

Summary of Relevant Findings of the Specialist Enrolment Policy Review

- ▶ “Most respondents (75%) reported diagnosis of a specific disability as the key eligibility criterion, with just over 20 per cent reporting PSD funding as the main criterion.
- ▶ There was some inconsistency between respondents’ understanding of eligibility criteria and evidence requirements. Some respondents provided separate eligibility criteria and evidence requirements, while others did not distinguish between these two mechanisms.
- ▶ Similarly, there was some inconsistency between reported eligibility criteria and the criteria outlined in the enrolment policy. For example, one school reported that they are a dual mode school (catering for students with mild to profound ID) but their enrolment policy on their website states the school is for students with a mild ID (IQ score between 50 and 70).” (Source: Page 6).

Recommendations and implementation plan from the Specialist Enrolment Policy Review

- ▶ Considering the findings from the enrolment policy survey and the inter-jurisdiction review, DE (formerly DET) is seeking to implement eight recommendations that will provide:
 - ▶ More consistent and standardised enrolment criteria for specialist schools and settings. This would have the dual benefit of assisting to manage demand at specialist schools and improving the clarity of specialist education information available to parents/carers
 - ▶ Standardised state-wide processes for placement of students with disability in a specialist setting including processes for prioritising placement and for placing students who do not meet the enrolment criteria. This would strengthen equity and fairness in enrolment decisions across the state
 - ▶ More accessible and comparable public information about specialist enrolment policies, including eligibility criteria, priority order of placement, and appeals
- ▶ “These needs are substantiated by direct feedback from specialist schools and impacted regional staff, who report that inconsistencies in specialist school enrolment criteria and process across the state are causing stress for parents/carers and creating extra work for schools and regions.” (Source: Page 8).

The department has since implemented all of the report's considerations.

Source: department of Education and Training. (2021). (rep.). Specialist Enrolment Policy Review Findings Report (pp. 1–17).



Appendix 5 Departmental websites providing information about educational support for students with disability and high needs

Government and department websites providing information about educational support for students with disability and high needs

The findings and recommendations in this review reference currently available information on schooling and educational support options for children with disabilities. These resources are aimed at parents, carers, school staff and other stakeholders which may include disability organisations, clinicians and early childhood educators. A sample of materials and websites are listed below, which have been gleaned from internet searches concerned with schooling and educational support for students with disabilities in Victoria. Search enquiries were conducted using pivotal phrases such as 'students with disabilities' and 'specialist school enrolment'.

Website Title	Target Audience	Website Location	Source
Enrolling in school: How to enrol your child in school	Parents/carers	Vic Gov	https://www.vic.gov.au/how-choose-school-and-enrol#if-your-child-has-a-disability
School operations: Enrolment	School staff	department of Education: Policy Advisory Library	https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/enrolment/guidance/enrolment-specialist-schools
School operations: Disability Inclusion Profile	School staff	department of Education: Policy Advisory Library	https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/disability-inclusion-profile/guidance/enrolment-specialist-schools
Specialist schools	Parents/carers	Victorian School Building Authority	https://www.schoolbuildings.vic.gov.au/specialist-schools
School operations: Students with Disability	School staff	department of Education: Policy Advisory Library	https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/students-disability/policy
Disability Inclusion: increased support for students with disabilities	Parents/carers, School staff	Department of Education	https://www.schools.vic.gov.au/disability-inclusion
Inclusive education for students with disabilities	Parents/carers, school staff	Vic Gov	https://www.vic.gov.au/inclusive-education-for-students-with-disabilities
Support at school for hearing loss	Parents/carers	Vic Gov	https://www.vic.gov.au/support-school-hearing-loss
Starting school	Parents/carers	Vic Gov	https://www.vic.gov.au/starting-school
School operations: Students with Disability	School staff	department of Education: Policy Advisory Library	https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/students-disability/policy
Inclusive education for students with disabilities	Parents/carers, school staff	Vic Gov	https://www.vic.gov.au/inclusive-education-for-students-with-disabilities
Program for Students with Disabilities	School staff	department of Education	https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/psd.aspx

The background of the slide is a complex financial chart. It features multiple overlapping lines in shades of blue, green, and red, along with candlestick patterns. The chart appears to be a technical analysis of stock prices, with various indicators and trends visible. The overall color scheme is dark, with the chart elements providing contrast.

Appendix 6

Specialist school student, parent/carer and principal survey result snapshot

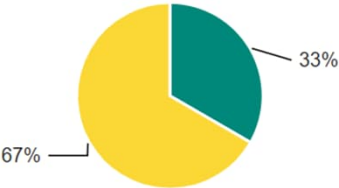
Students attending specialist schools survey results snapshot

In April of 2024, students attending specialist schools/settings were provided an optional survey relating to the specialist school eligibility review. The survey as of June 2024 had 15 responses, select results are displayed below.

Q2 How much of a say did you have in which school you went to? (Text Responses)

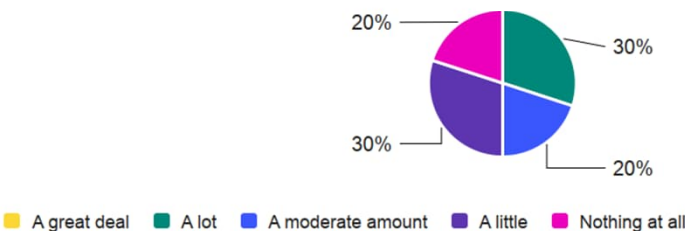
- ▶ “None”
- ▶ “A lot”
- ▶ “None”
- ▶ “not much”
- ▶ “100% It was great decision. I have really enjoyed my time at the Specialist school. I should have gone there when I was younger.”
- ▶ “It was the only specialist school brought to our attention that was nearby”
- ▶ “[...] When I went into year 7 at [mainstream school name] there was a change of principal and my whole support system broke down and every class was in a different room which made it really difficult for me and I couldn’t set up my support system. When I decided to transition to a specialist school there was only one in my local area.”

Q3 - Do you think students should get to have a say in what school they go to?



No Yes

Q4 - How much did you know about your specialist school before you went there?

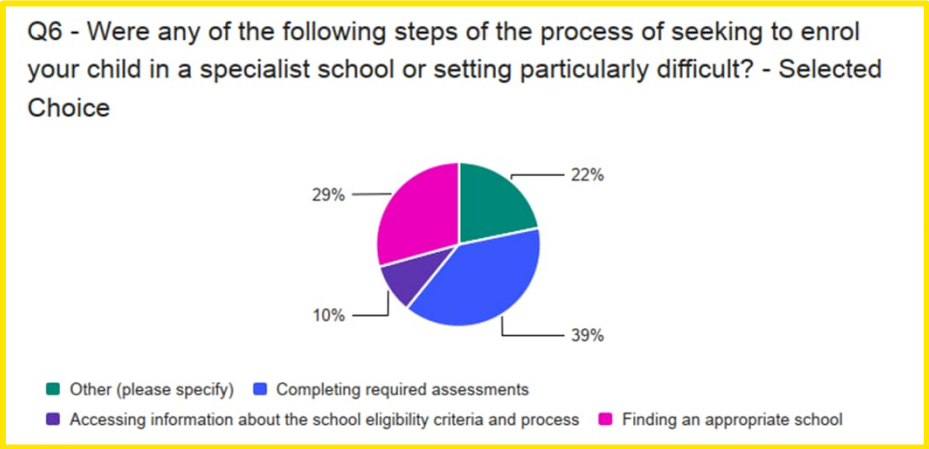
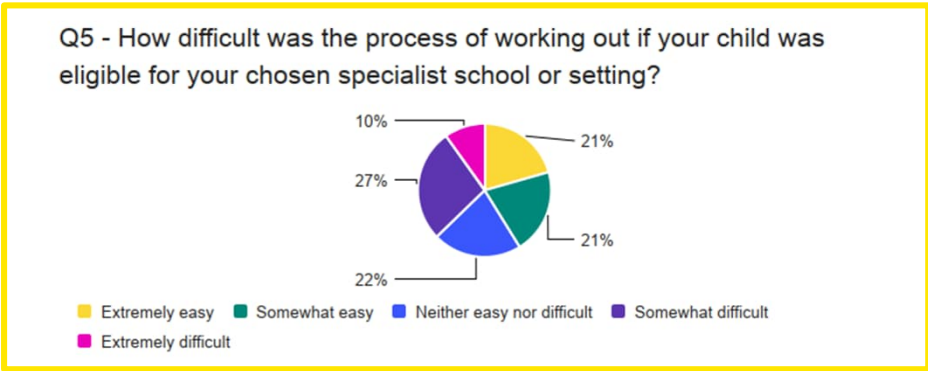
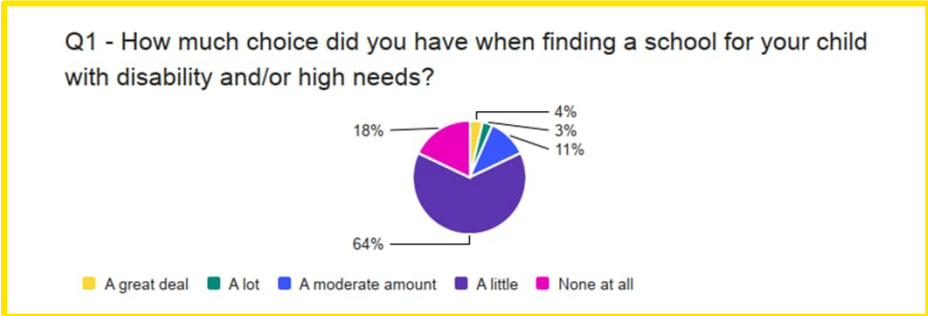
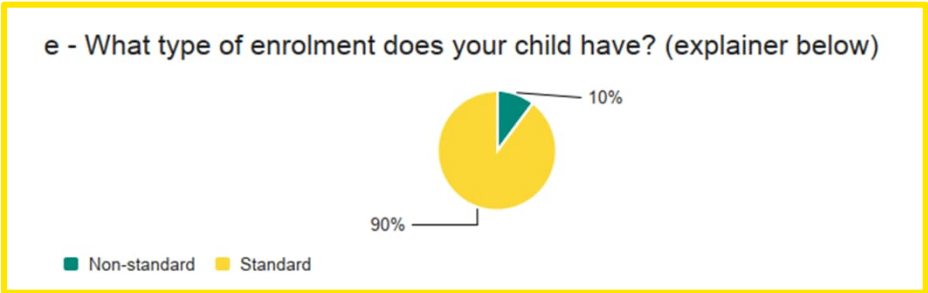


Q 5: Do you know what information your parents/carers had to provide to see if you were able to enrol in a specialist school? (Text Responses)

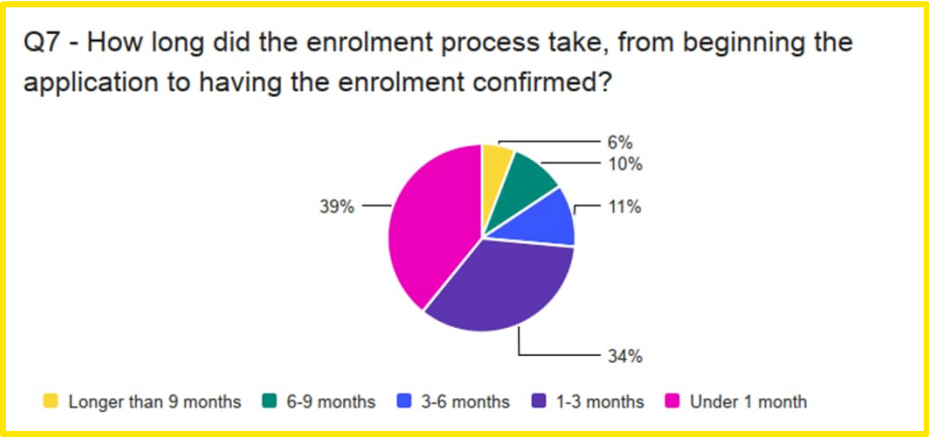
- ▶ “Psychology report with assessment score”
- ▶ “nothing much it was advised by a speech worker”
- ▶ “Psychology report, medical reports”
- ▶ “They were given information from my primary school”
- ▶ “My Mum and Dad told me about the school. I liked the school and I have really enjoyed school there for the first time in my life.”

Parents and carer survey results snapshot

In May of 2024, parents/carers of students attending specialist schools and settings were provided an optional survey relating to the specialist school eligibility review. The survey as of June 2024 had 170 responses, select results are displayed below.



- Q 6: Text responses to “other”
- “Both completing required assessments and accessing information about the school eligibility criteria and process were difficult
 - “The government caused a few hurdles that seemed excessive”
 - “The length of time taken throughout the whole process”
 - “My support worker did it all”
 - “Limited choice”



Specialist school/setting principal survey result snapshot

Specialist school and setting principals were surveyed in November 2023. The survey received 63 responses representing 63 different schools out of 84 specialist schools. Selected results are outlined on this page.

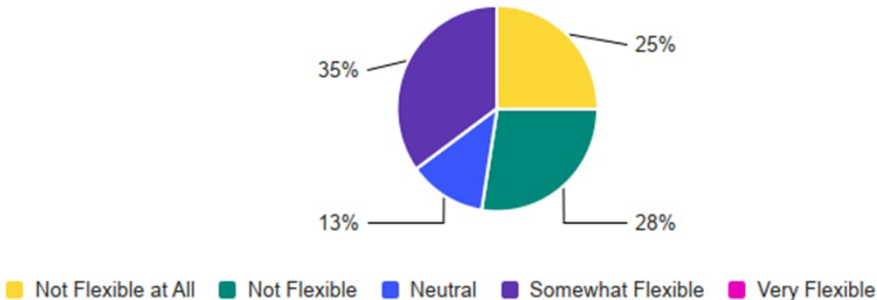
Q2 - 2. Does your school have any eligibility criteria requirements in addition to the 'default' Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD)-based criteria? a. If so, what are they and how were they determined? - Selected Choice



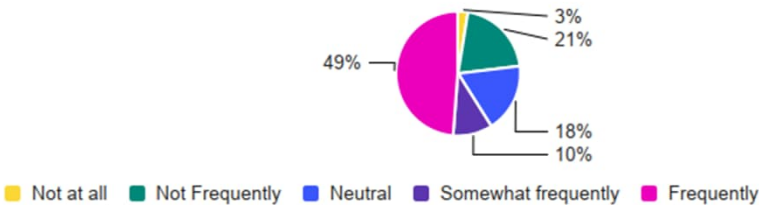
Q 2: Text responses to “other”

- “Mild ID i.e. FSIQ and Adaptive Behaviour between 50 and 70 We do not know how or when this was determined
- “Early Education Program - aged between 2.8 - 4.8 years at Jan. 1 of any year and must have developmental delays/difficulties, not necessarily an ID”
- “Language assessment under 70, FSIQ under 70, Diagnosis of autism”

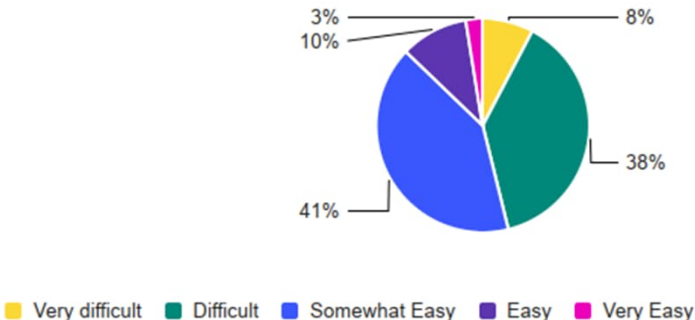
Q3 - 3. How flexible are the eligibility criteria for your school?



Q5 - 5. How often do you see students being unable to enrol in your school as a result of narrowly falling outside of eligibility criteria (e.g. exhibiting an IQ of 75 rather than 70)?



Q6 - 6. How easy do you think it is for parents to understand the eligibility criteria for your school?



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