

A strong disability & inclusion plan for staff.

Let's make it just as strong for students.

We welcome the Department's new draft disability plan — and the real standard it sets for **staff** with disability. Our ask is simple and constructive: extend that same standard to **students** with disability. The plan is still a draft, so there's time to get it right, together.

 **Still a draft — the final plan is due September 2026. Consultation is open now.**

✉ **Have your say — email your submission on the draft plan to youbelong@det.nsw.edu.au**

LET'S START WITH THE GOOD NEWS

What the plan gets right

There is a lot to welcome in this plan — and it's worth saying so.

✓ Grounds itself in the **social and human-rights models** of disability, and names ableism directly.

✓ Commits to **universal design** across buildings, digital systems and communication.

✓ Sets a **genuine standard for staff** with disability — evidence, measures, accountability and support.

✓ Was published in **interim form on purpose**, to allow more consultation before it's final.

These are real steps forward. Our recommendations are about helping the same care reach students.

The people most affected weren't at the table

The plan was shaped without directly consulting the students and families it affects most — or the peak bodies that represent them, such as Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) and the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP). Reform for neurodivergent students should be co-designed with them, not just for them — and there's still time, because consultation is open now.

WHO THIS IS ABOUT

A large — and growing — group of students in mainstream classrooms.

1.13m

school students received an adjustment for disability in 2025 — **27% of all enrolments.**

ACARA, National Report on Schooling, 2025

53% + 36%

the two biggest groups are **cognitive** and **social-emotional** disability — the categories that record autism, ADHD and learning disorders.

ACARA, National Report on Schooling, 2025

1 in 23

children aged 5–14 is autistic (4.3%) — a figure up **almost 42% since 2018**, before ADHD and learning disorders are counted.

ABS, Autism in Australia, 2022

Neurodivergent learners — autistic and ADHD students, and those with learning differences — are a large and growing part of this group. (NCCD categories also include intellectual disability and mental-health conditions; Helen's Way focuses on neurodivergent learners whose ability is on par with their peers.)

The standard is set for staff — let's extend it to students

Five times, the plan makes a clear commitment to staff with disability. For students with disability, the equivalent isn't there yet. We're simply asking for the same.

	Staff with disability	Students with disability
A dedicated report on their lived experience	 COMMITTED <i>Breaking Barriers</i> (2025), 12 recommendations	 NOT YET No student equivalent
Outcomes measured by disability, with a target to improve	 COMMITTED "An increase in staff-survey scores for staff with disability"	 NOT YET Student survey listed with no breakdown or target
Leadership accountable for disability inclusion	 COMMITTED Metrics in executive performance agreements	 NOT YET Not tied to student outcomes
A clear, independent complaints pathway	 COMMITTED Committed in the plan for staff	 NOT YET Not offered to students or families
Actions with a firm deadline	 COMMITTED Concrete terms (e.g. Term 4 2026)	 NOT YET Key student actions are "TBC" / "TBD"

Source: NSW Department of Education, *Interim Disability Inclusion Action Plan 2026–2029* (June 2026): staff report p.19; measures p.23; leadership & complaints p.36; student-action timeframes pp.32, 40. Full page references are in the Helen's Way submission.

▮ A GOOD START ON TRAINING — LET'S MAKE IT STICK

The plan commits to “*promote uptake*” of professional learning on disability and neurodiversity. That's welcome — and it works best when it's built to last.

Teachers themselves tell us they want to know more. The strongest way to help them is training that is sustained, not one-off — and given a firm timeframe (the plan currently lists this action as “TBC”).

Australia's national education evidence body found, in a randomised trial, that light-touch, one-off professional learning **doesn't meaningfully change classroom practice** on its own — sustained training does. (AERO, *Sustaining professional learning outcomes*, 2025.)

WHY GETTING IT RIGHT MATTERS

When the 'way' falls short, students end up away from school

Fewer children are attending regularly — and students with disability, and neurodivergent students in particular, are the most affected. This is the human cost of not getting support right.

73% → 62%

The share of students (Years 1–10) attending **90% or more** of the time fell from 73.1% in 2019 to 61.6% in 2023.

AERO, *School attendance: New insights*, 2025

More likely to be absent

Students with **disability, additional learning needs or specific learning disabilities** are more likely to be absent than their peers.

AERO, *School attendance: New insights*, 2025

'School can't'

School refusal — increasingly called "**school can't**" to reflect that students *cannot* attend, not that they choose not to — is rising, and is **most common among neurodivergent students**. Autism, ADHD, learning disorders and anxiety are named as the key drivers.

Senate inquiry, *The National Trend of School Refusal and Related Matters*, 2023

97% · 1 in 23

Among autistic students, **97.3%** face an educational restriction, and **1 in 23 (4.4%)** are unable to attend school because of their disability.

ABS, *Autism in Australia*, 2022

The link is clear: when the way support is delivered doesn't meet a neurodivergent student's needs, absence — and sometimes being unable to attend at all — too often follows. Strengthening this plan for students is one of the surest ways to keep them connected to school.

Nine ways to make the plan as strong for students as it is for staff.

1 Consult parents, carers and young people with disability — alongside staff networks and disability organisations.

2 Measure student outcomes by disability, publish them, and set a target to improve — as the plan already does for staff.

3 Design for sensory needs — lighting, noise and heat — alongside ramps and lifts.

4 Build systems that track the supports actually delivered, so teachers can manage them and provision is visible.

5 Commission a “Breaking Barriers” report for students, as the Department did for staff.

6 Include student disability outcomes in leadership accountability — with parent and student voice as a measure.

7 Offer students and families the same independent complaints pathway the plan promises staff.

8 Address the gap between demand and supply for specialist support — alongside a smoother application process.

9 Give the student actions firm deadlines, and make teacher training robust and sustained.

The standard already exists in this plan. Together, let's make sure it reaches students.

Helen's Way advocates for neurodivergent learners in mainstream education settings across Australia whose ability is on par with their peers — students whose barrier is the way support is delivered, not the *what*. We welcome this plan, and we're ready to help make it as strong for students as it already is for staff. Above all, it should be shaped with neurodivergent students, their families and the bodies that represent them — not just for them. It's still open for consultation — that's the moment.

✉ **Making a submission on the draft plan? Send your response to the Department at youbelong@det.nsw.edu.au.**

[See our Reform Agenda →](#)

[Read the plan we're responding to →](#)

SOURCES

1. NSW Department of Education, *Interim Disability Inclusion Action Plan 2026–2029* (June 2026) — the plan itself; page references above and in the Helen's Way submission.
2. ACARA, *National Report on Schooling in Australia* (2025) — students receiving adjustments (1,125,502; 27% of enrolments) and the breakdown by category of disability (cognitive 53.0%, social-emotional 36.3%).
3. Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Autism in Australia, 2022* — autism prevalence (4.3% of 5–14-year-olds; up 41.8% since 2018) and school impact (97.3% educational restriction; 4.4% unable to attend).
4. Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO), *School attendance: New insights from AERO* (2025) — the fall in students attending 90%+ of the time (73.1% in 2019 to 61.6% in 2023) and higher absence among students with disability.
5. Australian Senate Education and Employment References Committee, *The National Trend of School Refusal and Related Matters* (2023) — school refusal / "school can't" and its links to neurodivergence and anxiety.
6. AERO, *Sustaining professional learning outcomes* (2025) — evidence that sustained, not one-off, professional learning changes classroom practice.

Helen's Way — a volunteer-led advocacy initiative for neurodivergent learners in mainstream education settings across Australia. Every figure above is verified against its primary source before publication; our resources are researched, written and checked by volunteers with the help of AI tools. Prepared July 2026. An advocacy resource offered in a spirit of partnership with the Department — general information only, not legal advice. helensway.au