

Students with Disability Review

to strengthen the inclusion, learning and wellbeing of students with disability



**Issues and Challenges for
Inclusion, Learning and Wellbeing of
Students with Disability
in South Australian Catholic Schools**

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Context of paper

The paper on the *Issues and Challenges for Inclusion, Learning and Wellbeing of Students with Disability* is one component of the suite of material that has been developed by the independent Review of Students with Disability established by the South Australian Commission for Catholic Schools in 2020.

The paper is a companion document to the *Profile of Students with Disability in South Australian Catholic Schools* that the Review has also prepared.

Further information of about the Students with Disability Review can be found on the Students with Disability webpage at <https://www.cesa.catholic.edu.au/news/students-with-disability-review> including the *Review Purpose and Process* and the *Review Discussion Paper*.

The webpage also includes reports and analyses that have arisen from the Review's engagement and consultation process:

- *Students with Disability Conversations Report*
- *Parents/Carers/Guardians Survey Report*
- *Community Members Survey Report*
- *Principals of Catholic schools Survey Report*
- *School Staff Survey Report*
- *Catholic Education Office Staff Survey Report*.

In parallel with the stakeholder engagement and consultation process, the Review has undertaken the following further activities:

- visited the following groups of schools to interview Principals, Inclusion Coordinators and other leadership team members to gain their insights into each school's Students with Disability programs and structures and to gather relevant documentation in:
 - mainstream schools in country and metropolitan locations
 - the five schools with special units
 - the flexible learning school and two special schools
- interviewed members of Catholic Education's Executive Leadership Team
- interviewed Catholic Education's School Quality Performance Consultants
- interviewed members of the Catholic Education's Learning Diversity and Equity team
- consulted with external disability experts, including the State Government's Disability Advocate
- consulted with Department of Education senior officers with responsibility for Disability policy and programs
- consulted with senior officers from a Local Area Coordination agency responsible for providing NDIS programs and support services
- analysed NDIS Reports and the Reports of major Disability Reviews in other Australian states and territories
- analysed NCCD data as it relates to students with disability in Catholic schools in South Australia.

Catholic Commitment to Inclusion

The commitment to Inclusion is a tenet of the Catholic Church.

The commitment as it relates to disability is explicitly affirmed in the *New Directory for Catechesis*, released by the Vatican in June 2020.

Included in the *Directory* is a section on *A culture of inclusion* that highlights the importance of “welcoming and recognising” the differently-abled. It stresses that they are witnesses to the essential truths of human life and are to be welcomed as a great gift. Their families are deserving of “respect and admiration”.

The *Directory* affirms that to achieve a culture that includes the differently-abled, “*Full accessibility should be the goal for every parish and these adaptations are to be an ordinary part of the liturgical life of the parish.*”

Pope Francis affirms the relationship between the culture of inclusion in Catholic schools as well as parishes when he states, “*An education in the fullness of humanity should be the defining feature of Catholic schools. An inclusive education finds a place for all.*”

Culture of Inclusion in Catholic schools for Students with Disability

Catholic education in South Australia has a well-established and long-standing commitment to the provision of programs and structures for students with disability.

The current strategic context of this commitment is presented in the *CESA Living, Learning, Leading Framework* that expresses the mission of Catholic education in South Australia.

The *Living, Learning, Leading Framework* states that each child and young person in a Catholic school and college in South Australia is to be supported to develop the specific knowledge, skills and attributes that are associated with thriving, learning, and leading in a rapidly changing and complex world.

The Framework expresses the commitment of Catholic education, in partnership with families and parishes, to develop the capabilities of each student to live, learn and lead, to be comfortable and confident in who they are, and to make a difference in their world.

The commitment applies to students with disability, as it does to every student.

The Review’s engagement and consultation process has asked key stakeholders their experience of the extent to which Catholic schools are successful in providing a culture of inclusion for students with disability.

The engagement and consultation process has included:

- interviews with 122 students with a range of disabilities in 24 Catholic schools across country and metropolitan South Australia
- surveys with the following groups with the number of respondents:

Parents/Guardians/Carers	343
Members of the Community	100
Principals	98
School staff	822
Catholic Education Office Staff	56
Total	1,419

The Review has also produced the *Profile of Students with Disability in South Australian Catholic Schools*. The report uses NCCD data to analyse the patterns in the Level of Adjustments that schools have provided for students with disability. It also analyses patterns in the Categories of Disability related to the students

The *Issues and Challenges for Inclusion, Learning and Wellbeing of Students with Disability* brings together the following:

- the view of students as presented in the *Students with Disability Conversations Report*
- the different stakeholder perspectives and experiences as presented in the Reports of the Surveys with Parents, Community Members, Principals and Staff in Schools and the Catholic Education Office
- the information and insights the Review has gathered from interviews with school leaders, senior executives in Catholic Education and senior members of other agencies
- the Review's analysis of NCCD data as it relates to South Australian Catholic schools
- analyses of research papers.

The paper begins by presenting the views of students.

The paper then uses the *Disability Standards for Education (2005)* as the framework to analyse the perspectives of key stakeholders and identify a range of related issues and challenges.

Inclusion – the student’s lived experience

Fostering a Culture of Inclusion

Students with disability generally feel welcomed and included in their schools.

All the students comment on the importance of having friends at school and being able to just have fun with friends.

Many students particularly in small schools comment that the whole school doing something fun together forms bonds and makes people feel they belong in the community.

Some students reveal they have moved to their current school because of bullying or not getting the learning support they needed. School celebrations and fun activities maintain a sense of belonging, but only if you have friends and are getting the help you need.

Students emphasise the importance of schools having lessons on respectful relationships and how to get along well together.

They stress that schools should listen to them about their learning and wellbeing needs. They know what they are doing well and where they need help.

Students affirm that ‘not having an opportunity to join in the conversation about the help and support I need is not good enough’.

They say schools need to both informally and formally include them in the planning, implementation, reviewing and feedback about their supports and their learning.

Learning and wellbeing

Students in primary schools speak about learning supports that occur daily, or several times a week, or as needed, or accessed through particular groups or programs, over a term or semester.

All students said the easiest way to get support is to ask the teacher. Most students feel confident in asking for help from the teacher, Education Support Officer (ESO) or friends in class.

Primary students identify as useful those programs that build their literacy and numeracy skills in their learning and social skills programs to assist with making friends and self-management.

Students generally feel these programs help them to keep up in class or focus on what they need to learn or where they are up to. They receive this support daily or several times a week from teachers and ESO staff.

Majority of senior primary students are able to speak about their growing self-management strategies. They report progress from ‘lots of melt downs’ to ‘now most of the time I know what to do before I get too angry or frustrated’.

They are pleased when teachers have trust in them to know when to take a break, cool off and return to the task. They reflect a sense of accomplishment as they don’t want to be out of control or having to be out of class.

Some students report this is still a work in progress and need assistance to practice the strategies that keep them calm and focused on learning or when playing in the yard.

Many students can identify a safe space in the class or in the school - a couch, bean bag, corner space with cushions and posters of calm places, a room (Rainbow or Wellbeing room) or seat in the office or on the verandah that allows them to chill out without interrupting anyone else.

Students identify how working in a group gives time for discussion and sharing ideas before having to write. Group projects mean they can share the tasks, but still get all the information.

Working individually is identified as successful when they know what to do and need to get the task finished without distraction.

Secondary students express frustration with teachers who don't know about their learning needs or the appropriate supports that help them learn.

Secondary students identify assistance with their learning from teachers, ESOs in class and from support staff in the Learning Support Centres as effective and available for them on a daily basis.

The Learning Support Centre is identified as providing support for subjects like Essential English and Maths and where they can access support and advice for subject choice, post school pathways and the Personal Learning Plan, as well as social supports and catching up with assignments and homework.

Some students find the noise and pace of the larger secondary schools overwhelming and prefer to spend more time in a Learning Support Centre or Library during breaks.

For some students being able to work in a Learning Support Centre when the classroom gets too loud or distracting, or being able to work alone, or at their pace to complete work or get help, is a preferred and helpful support.

Students value feedback from teachers as helpful to improve their work skills and like teachers to touch base with them often to know when they need more or less assistance.

Students want teachers and other students to understand their learning difficulty or disability and to help them stay focused. They want teachers to know about their disability and to make the adjustments before they have to explain their disability or ask teachers for the adjustments.

Students want teachers to put learning supports in place, to keep calm, and to not wait until there is a problem before intervening.

Almost every student interviewed said it is important to have a good relationship with their teachers.

Support Services

Students are able to identify services that have been helpful to them in the past or in ongoing therapy. These supports included Psychologists, Occupational Therapists, Speech services, and Sight and Vision services.

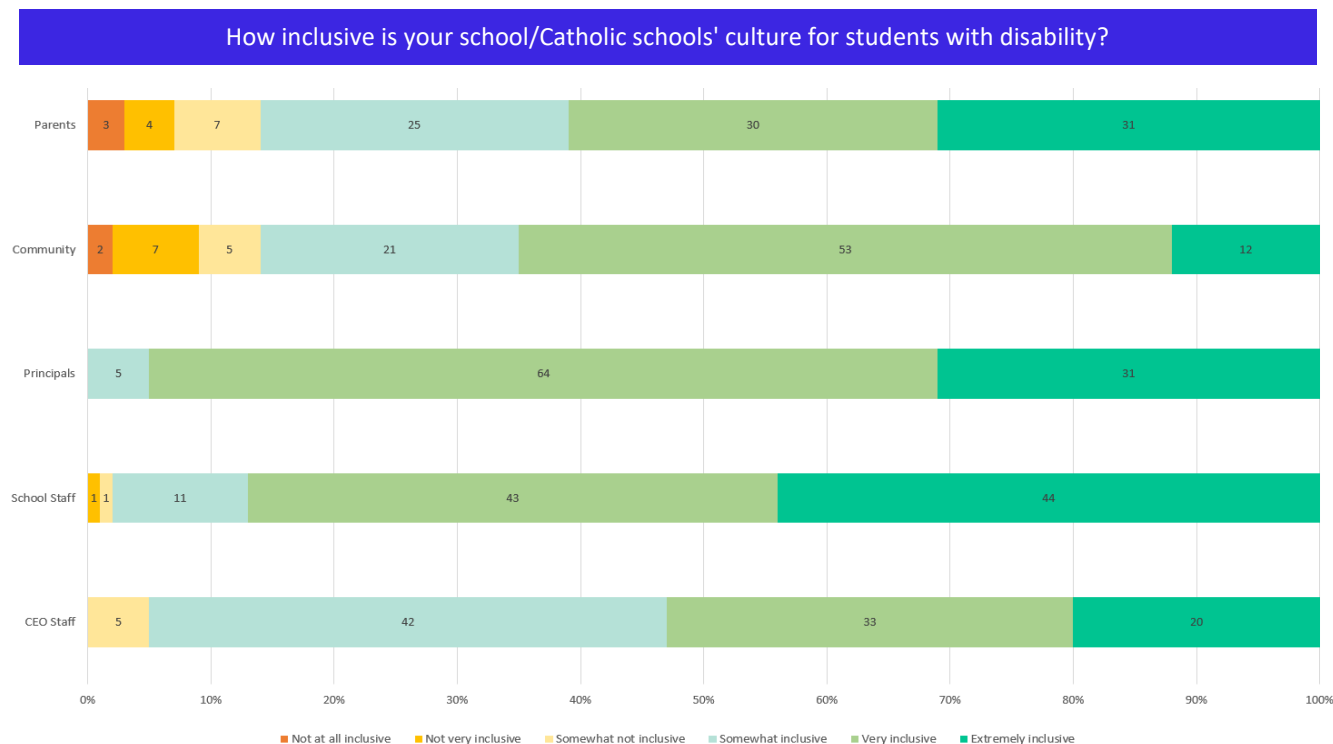
Students feel they have gained skills and strategies they can use at school to manage their emotions, or to calm themselves, or to lower anxiety.

Students refer to developing their "Network of Trusted People" and services they can use to get help or to talk to someone when things are not going well. While for some students updating the network has not occurred recently, most are able to name their 'go to' supports at school.

Towards a Culture of Inclusion for Students with Disability

The first question in the five stakeholder surveys focuses on the culture of inclusion for students with disability in Catholic schools.

The following graph summarises the views of the different groups as to the level of inclusion.



The graph demonstrates the great majority of respondents in all five groups consider Catholic schools are supportive of the inclusion of students with disability.

The graph also points to a degree of difference between the five groups as to the level of dissatisfaction with regards to the inclusion of students with disability.

There may be a variety of reasons for the difference.

The comments of principals in their survey responses convey their core belief in the inclusion of students as integral to the mission of Catholic education. They talk of their passion in ensuring that each child is treated with the greatest respect. The survey responses are often their affirmation of the importance of inclusion.

Other respondents who provide lower ratings tend to focus on specific school experiences they have found unsatisfactory and referred to these in the Comments. These could be their inability to secure a placement in a specific school, or a difficulty in an enrolment process, or an interaction with an individual staff member, or restrictions in the availability of services.

The issue here is not which group is right or wrong in their views. The essential issue is there exists an important degree of difference between the views.

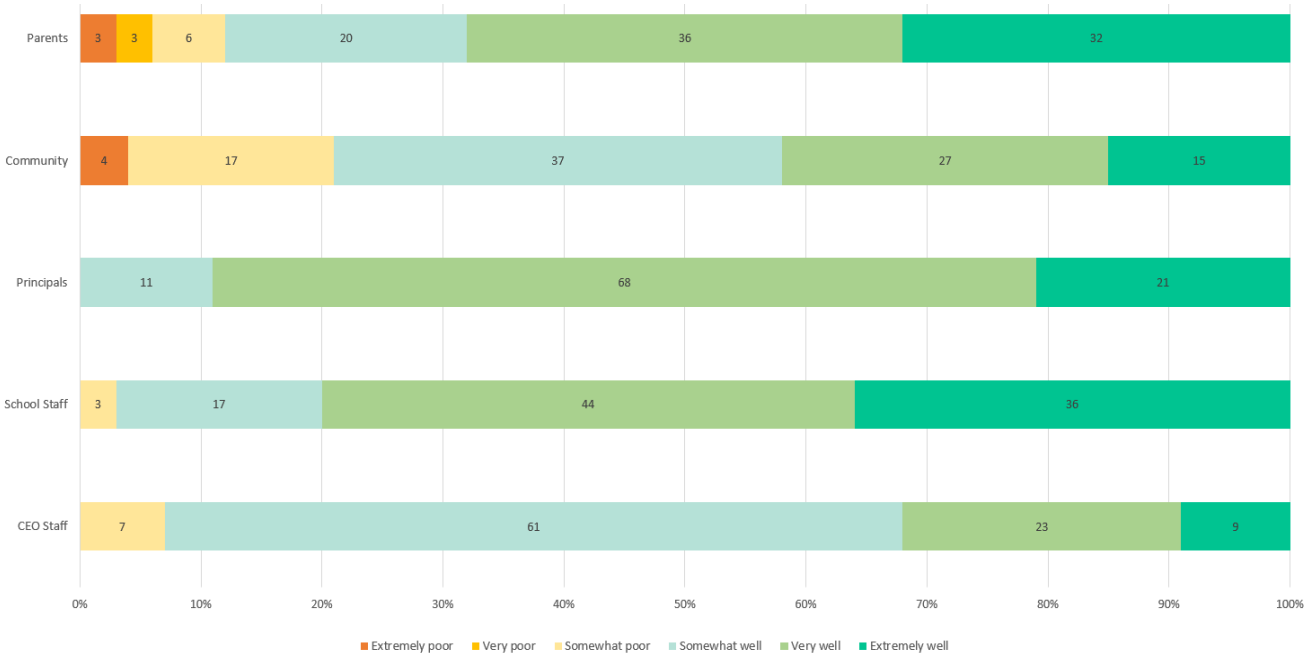
Strengthening the culture of inclusion for students with disability comes from understanding the reasons for the differences. Improvement comes from identifying, analysing and changing the expectations and practices that generate the different views.

The following sections address some of the key areas of understanding and practices related to the learning and wellbeing of students with disability. The sections are organised around the *Disability Standards for Education (2005)*.

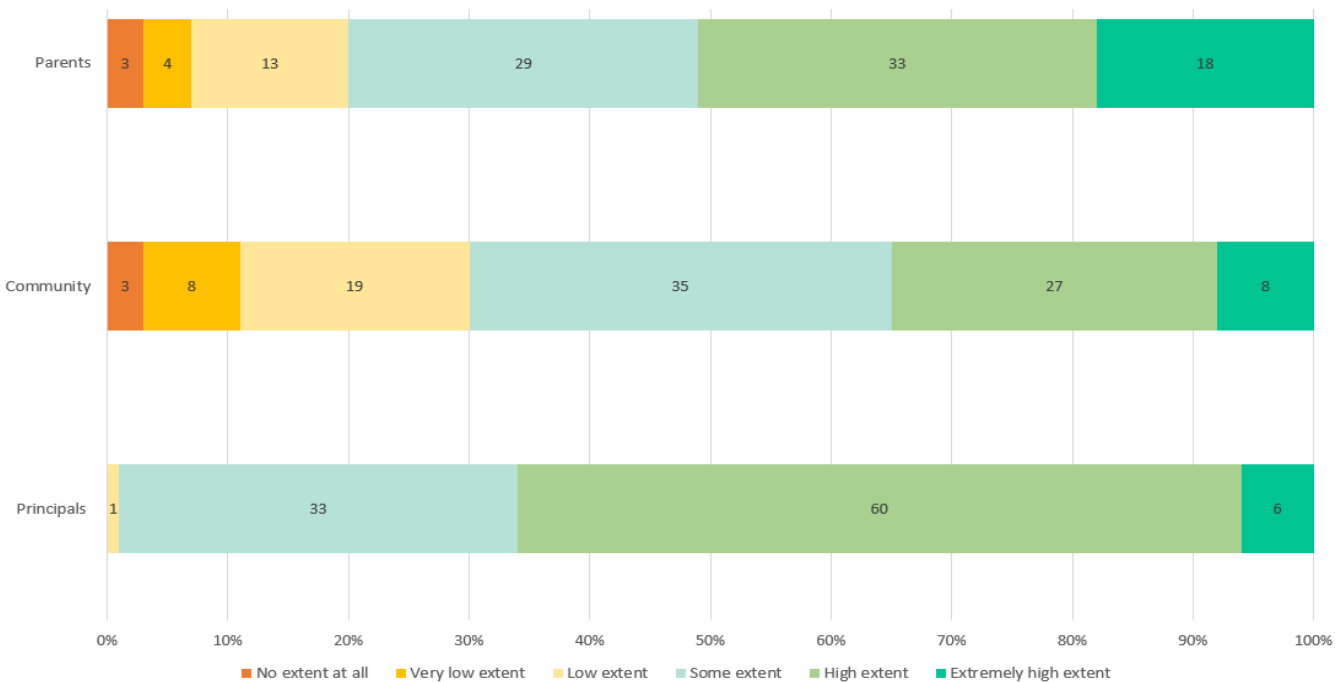
Learning and wellbeing

Perspectives of key groups

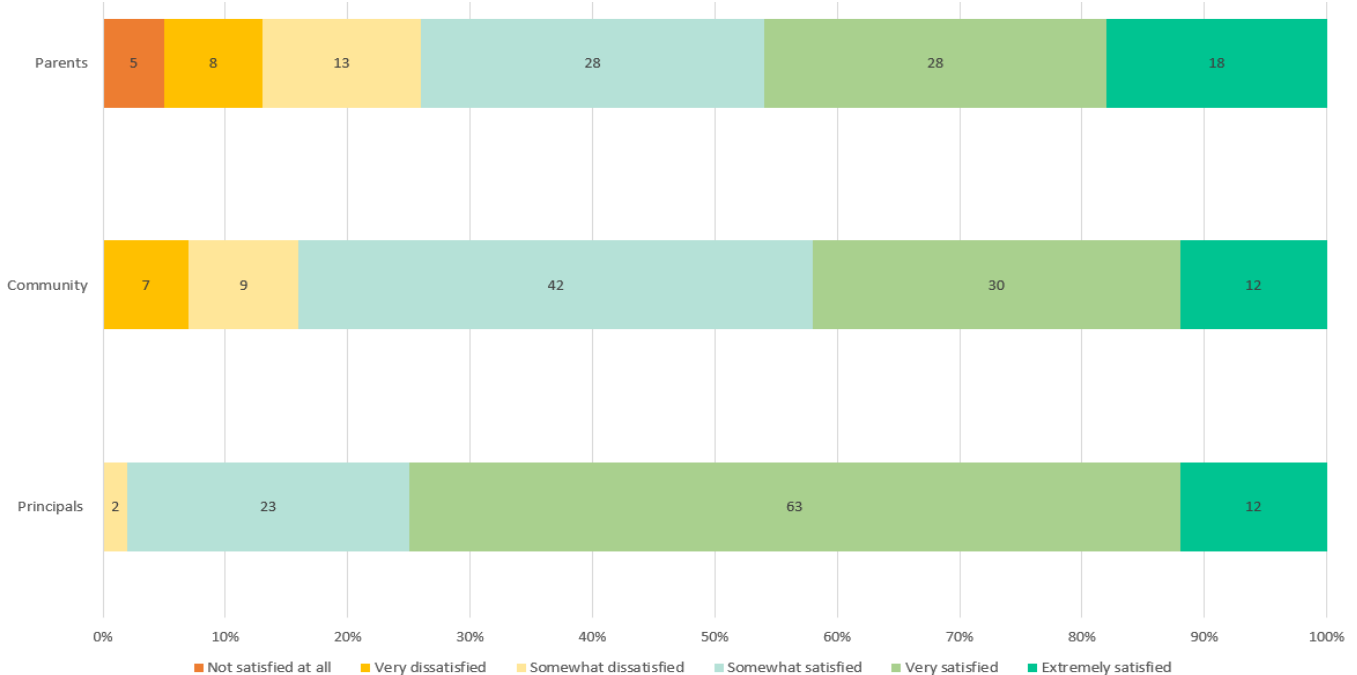
How well does your school/Catholic schools recognise the needs of students with disability?



To what extent are the programs and learning activities in Catholic schools flexible enough for students with disability to be able to participate?



Level of satisfaction of negotiation, agreement, recording, and implementation of adjustments to learning programs for students with disability in your school/Catholic schools



Issues and challenges

The key issue in the responses to the surveys is the variation in responses.

Generally, 80% of parents and community members agree with Catholic principals and staff that Catholic schools effectively recognise the needs of students with disability. Alongside this affirmation lies the 20% of parents and community members who do not agree. This level of dissatisfaction grows when they provide their views on the more specific aspects of how the learning of students with disability is managed.

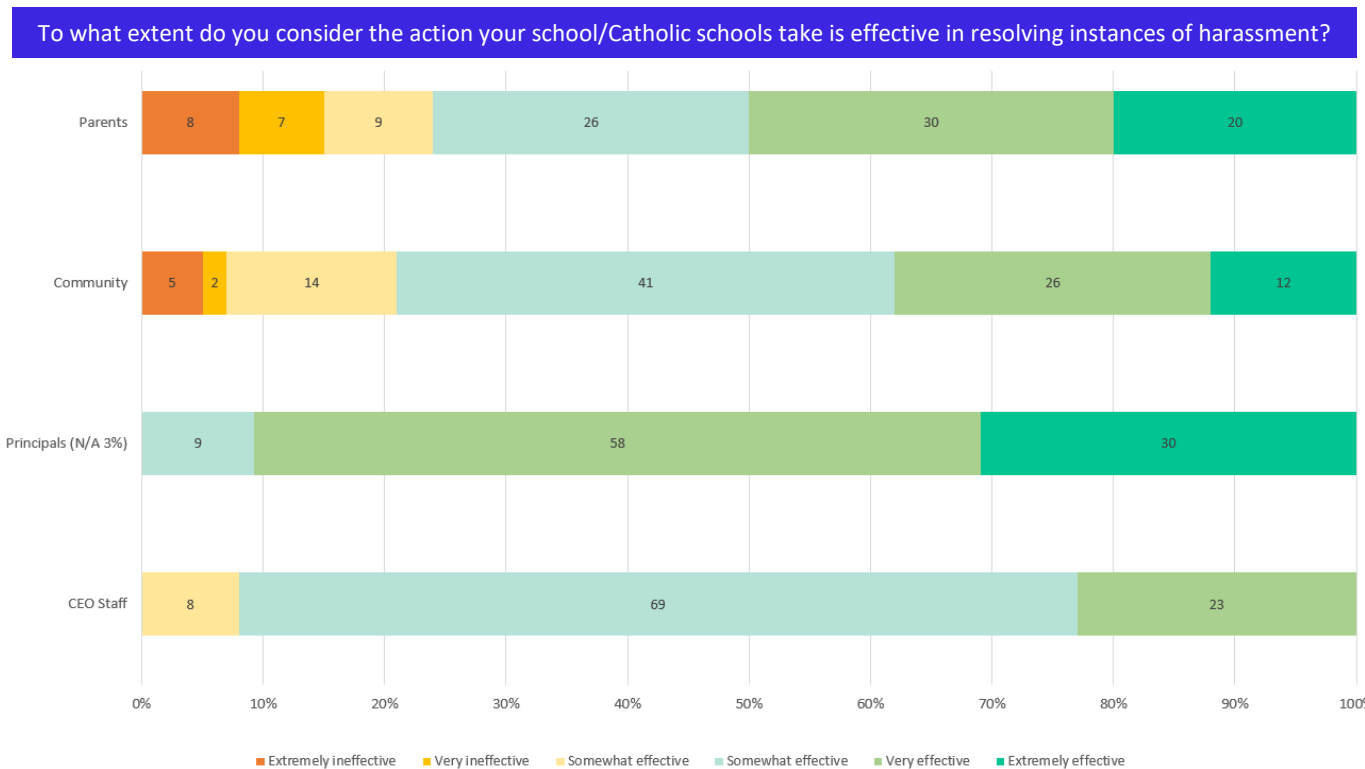
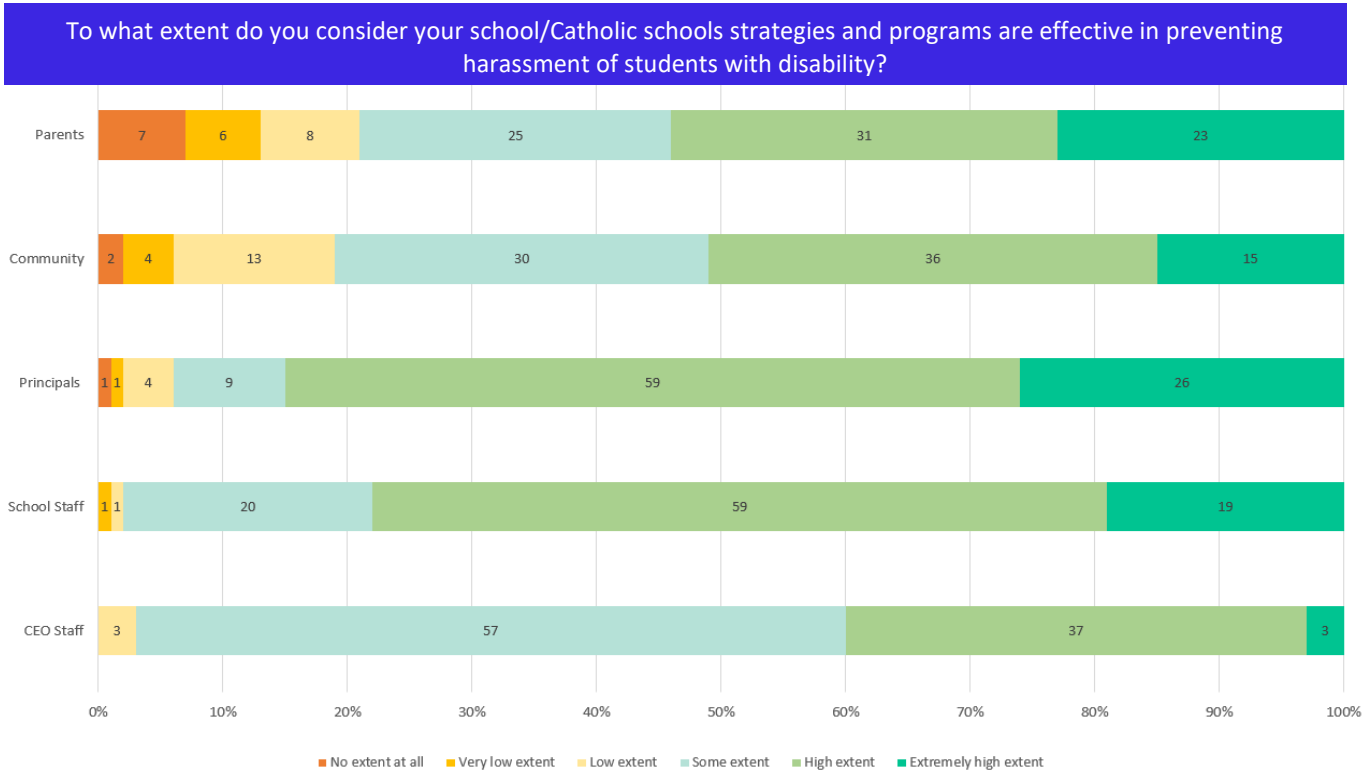
The Review has identified a range of factors that can account for this variation in perspective and that need to be addressed. They include:

- the increasing diversity and complexity of the needs of students with disability as they progress through the years of schooling
- the high numbers of students whose disability falls in the cognitive and/or social-emotional categories, together with the impact of autism, especially in boys
- a tendency in some instances to focus on the behaviour of students with disability, rather than how the nature of the disability directly impacts on their behaviour and learning, together with the impact of this factor on the relationship between the student and teacher and the wellbeing of both students and teachers
- often a limited clarity as to the level of curriculum and assessment the student with disability will be undertaking, and the associated development, monitoring and reporting of their learning
- the differences between the school organisational structures of primary settings and those of secondary settings, and how these impact on the assistance provided to students
- differences in the expectations of parents and schools about what a school can or should reasonably provide for an individual student with disability.

In all of the above, the voice of each student needs to be heard. In the Review conversations, the students make it clear they understand their needs. They want – and expect – to be included in the processes and adjustments that improve their learning and wellbeing.

Eliminating harassment

Perspectives of key groups



Issues and challenges

Again the key issue in the survey responses is the variation in responses.

Overall 75-80% of parents and community members agree with Catholic principals and staff that Catholic schools handle most harassment issues well.

These survey respondents regard effective processes to address harassment to be a key area for classroom learning and relationships with parents and the wider school community.

The responses indicate many schools follow a grievance policy that is made known to parents.

It is also evident from the responses that some parents and other members of the community hold reservations about how well Catholic schools address harassment.

The student conversations also indicate that for some students with disability harassment has been a factor that has affected their need to change schools.

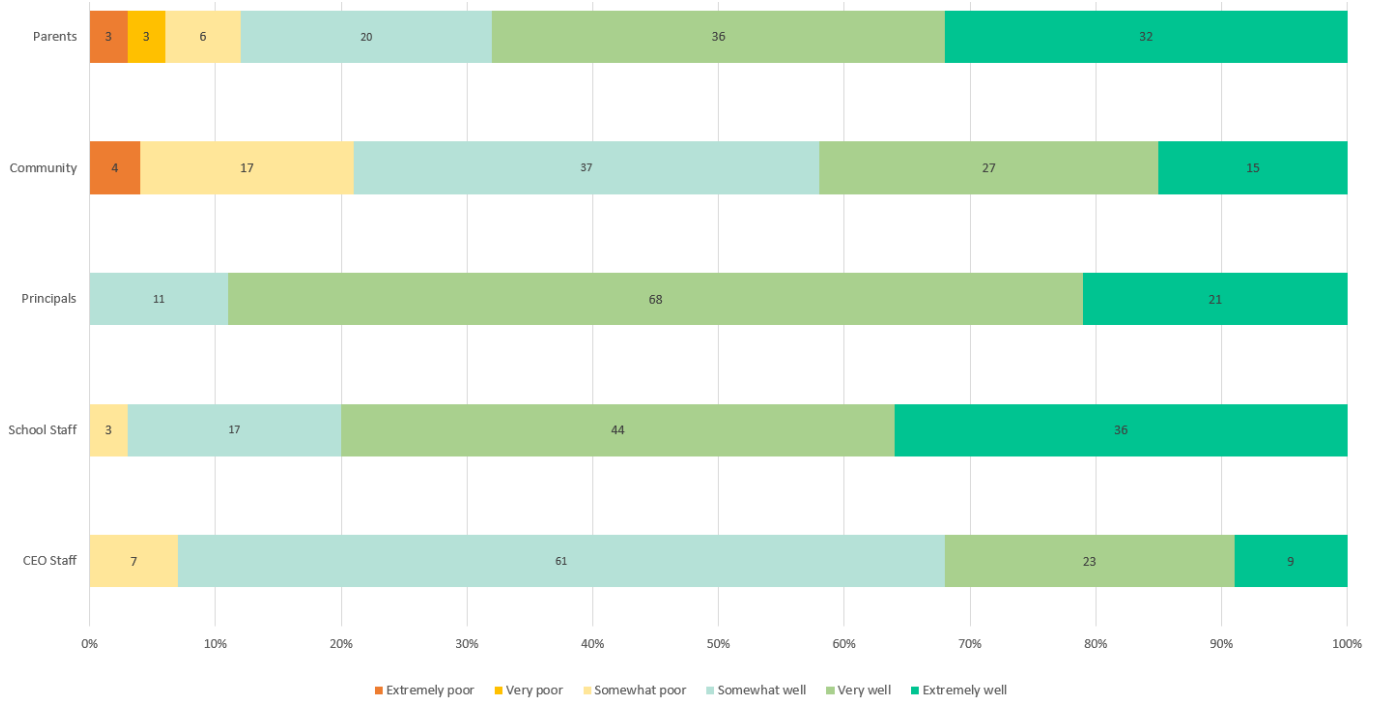
Some factors the Review has identified that may account for this variation in perspective and that need to be addressed include:

- instances where harassment is addressed as isolated events rather than as part of a school wide learning program appropriate for different year levels with child friendly procedures for dealing with harassment
- the use of school strategies to deal with harassment that are preventative rather than occur after the event
- the importance of schools using strategies that empower students with a disability to handle harassment if and when it occurs
- the use of more effective strategies that address the differences in the views of some parents as to what constitutes harassment and how it should be addressed.

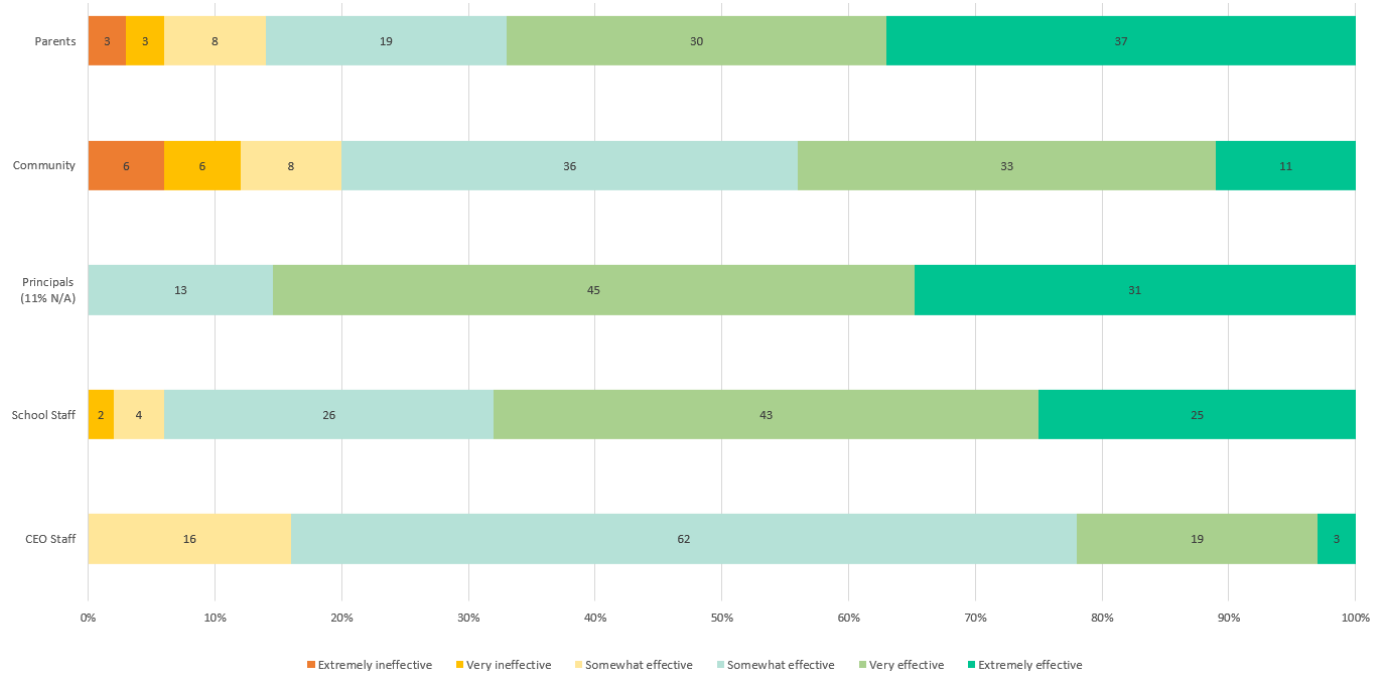
Enrolment and transition

Perspectives of key groups

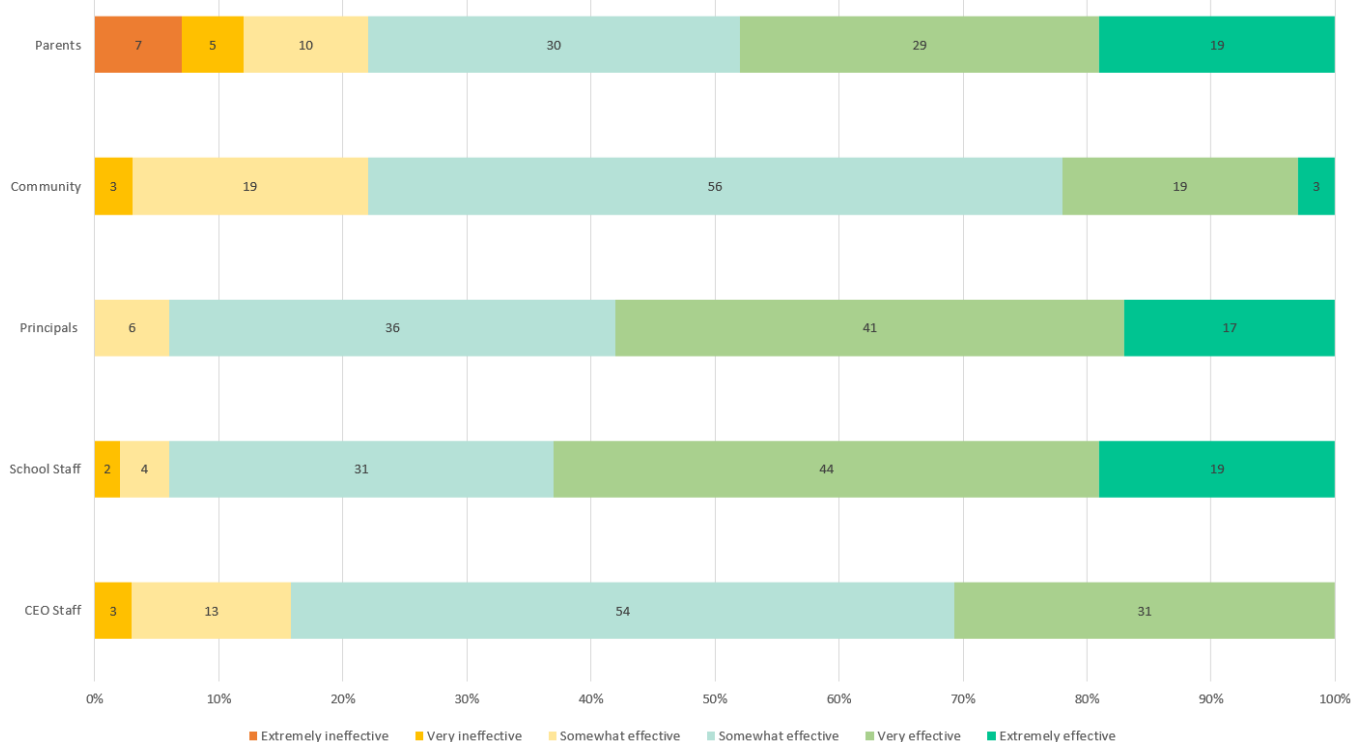
How well does the enrolment process at your school/Catholic schools recognise the needs of students with disability?



How effective is the transition process for children with disability from their early years setting to Reception in your school/Catholic schools?



How effective is the transition process for students with disability from their initial setting into future pathways?



Issues and challenges

The same diversity in survey responses is evident with regards to enrolment and transition.

It is clear that for the majority of respondents, the enrolment and transition processes of Catholic schools are inclusive of students with disability.

Catholic Principals clearly consider that their school's enrolment processes are inclusive of students with disability and meet the Disability Standards for Education.

One noticeable feature of the responses is the higher level of dissatisfaction expressed by members of the community survey group. In some instances they indicate their experience with a Catholic school had deterred them from enrolling. Others indicate they had left the Catholic system.

The diversity of survey responses about enrolment and transition points to an underlying discrepancy in the expectations that schools and some parents have of each other.

This discrepancy is often the manifestation of a difference in perspective as to what is reasonable for a school to do to meet the needs of a student with disability. Underlining this perspective is the probable mismatch of views as to the rights of parents and the obligations of schools.

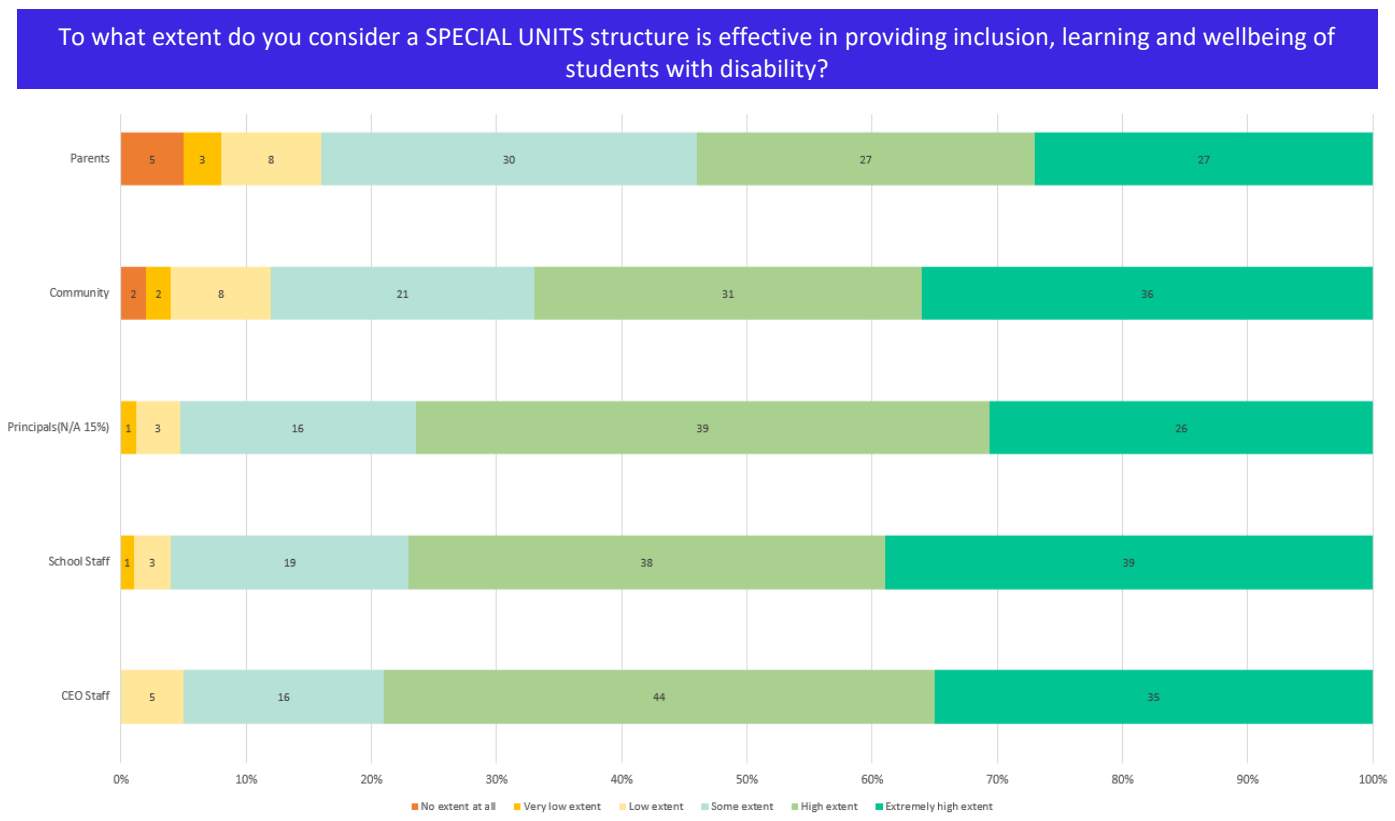
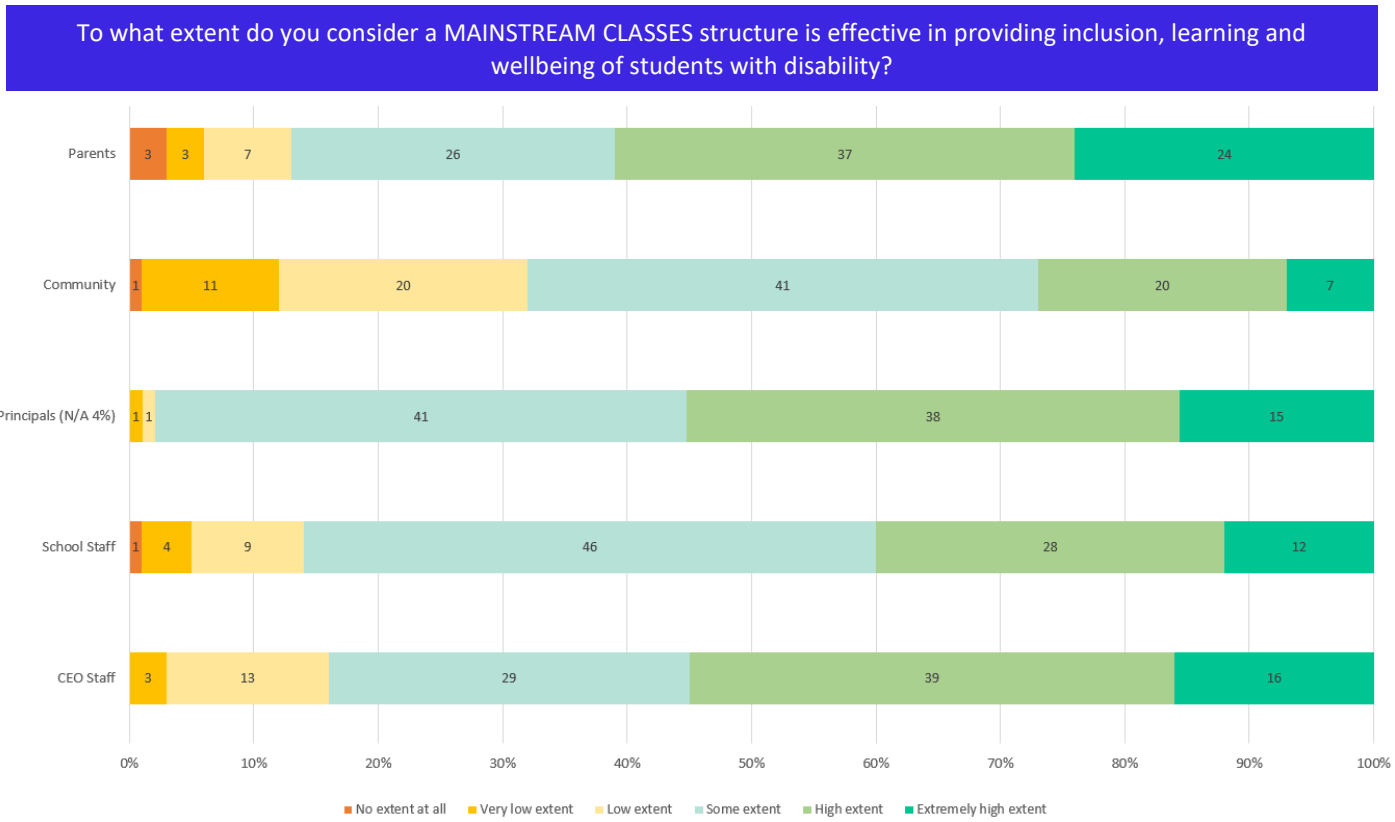
These issues sit at the heart of how the *Disability Discrimination Act (DDA)* and the *Disability Standards for Education (DSE)* are interpreted and applied to CESA's commitment to inclusion.

The Review has identified a range of matters that, at the very least, should be addressed with regards to these issues. They include:

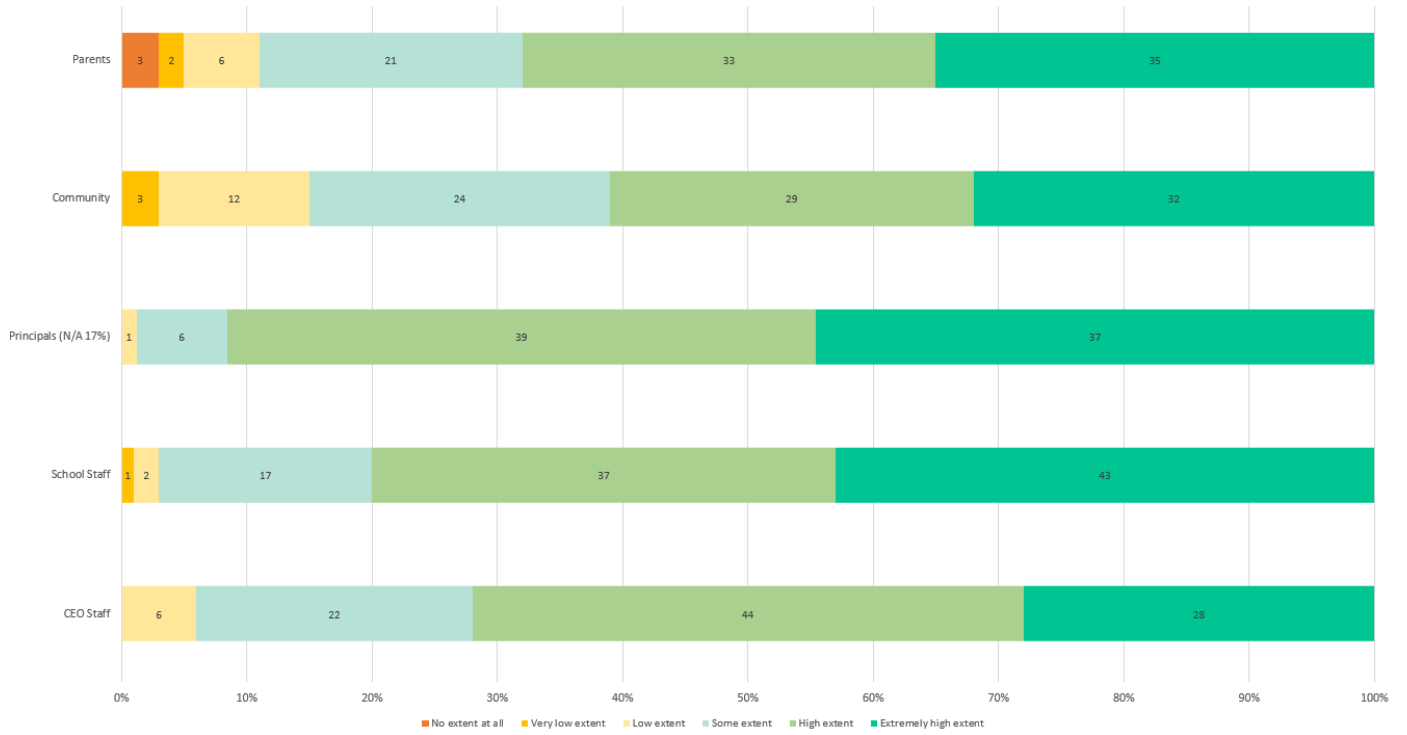
- establishing transition arrangements between early learning centres and Catholic primary schools for students with disability
- revision of the existing CESA's Enrolment Policy to better address the complexities that schools and parents face in the enrolment process for students with disability
- greater clarity and consistency in the student enrolment and transition procedures in schools, with clear lines of communication to parents
- clarification of the responsibilities of school staff in the enrolment and transition process for students with disability, particularly as to which staff meet with parents and students.

School structures

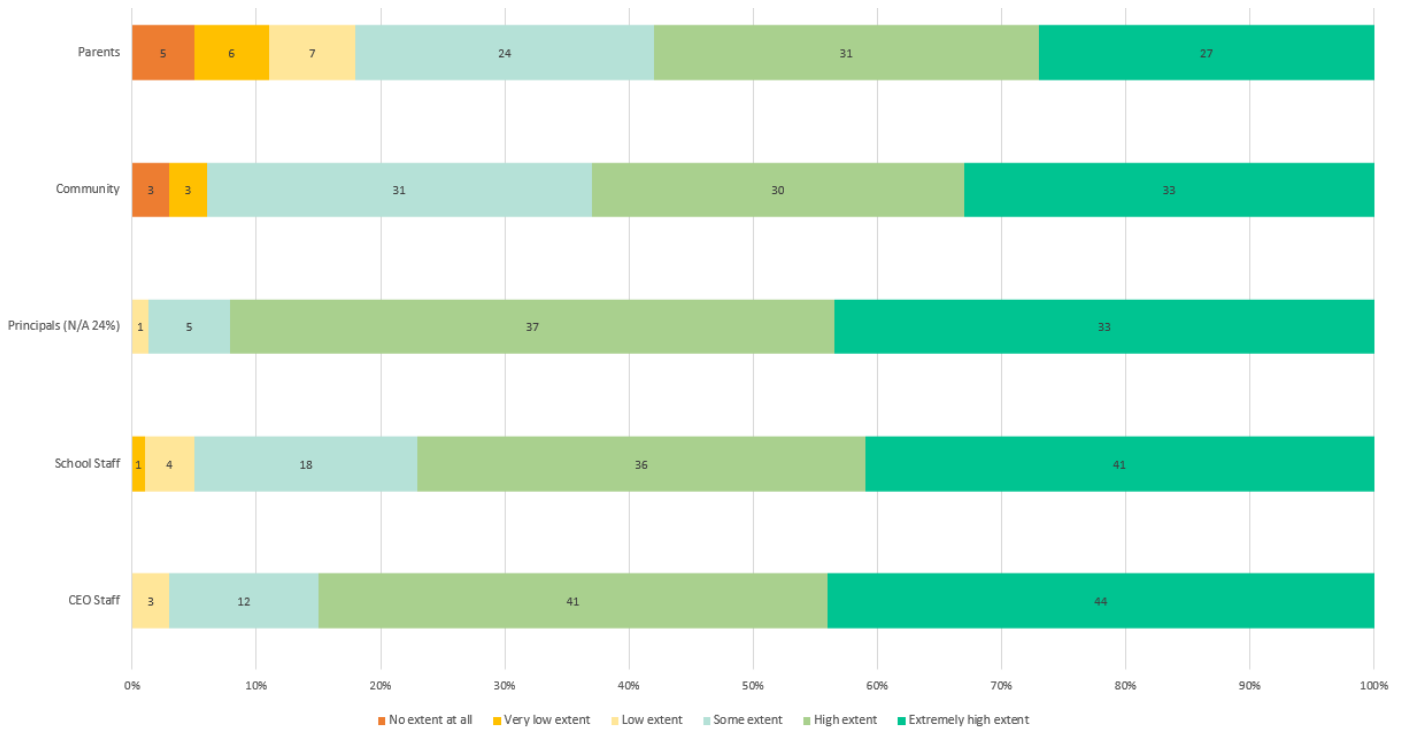
Perspectives of key groups



To what extent do you consider a COMBINATION OF MAINSTREAM CLASSES AND A SPECIAL UNIT structure is effective in providing inclusion, learning and wellbeing of students with disability?



To what extent do you consider a SPECIAL SCHOOL OR SPECIAL SETTING structure is effective in providing inclusion, learning and wellbeing of students with disability?



Issues and challenges

The Review's purpose in asking each group to record what they regard to be the strengths and limitations of the different school structures was to gather as much information and insights as possible about the functions and outcomes of mainstream inclusion, special units, a combination of mainstream with special units, and special schools for students with disability.

The Review did this knowing it would be unlikely for any respondent to have first-hand experience of all the structures. This factor is evident in the number of principals who indicate they were unable to comment on some structures because these exist outside their direct experience.

Again there was a variation in responses. The survey comments from respondents often indicate their responses are underpinned by different philosophical views as to the nature of inclusion, integration, segregation and exclusion.

There is a call from some respondents to expand the range of settings to provide more special schools, or more special units, or more mainstream options, so as to provide a suitable fit for each individual student with disability.

There is a call from some respondents to provide more flexible options in the settings.

There is no clear call to remove or close any one of the specific settings.

In the Review's investigations and analyses, it has identified there are significant variations between how each of the settings provide inclusion, learning and wellbeing for students with disability.

There are variations between mainstream schools in their provision for students with disability. There are variations between the five special units. There are variations between the two special schools.

The Review has also identified there are some mainstream schools that achieve similar outcomes for students with disability as those schools with the special units.

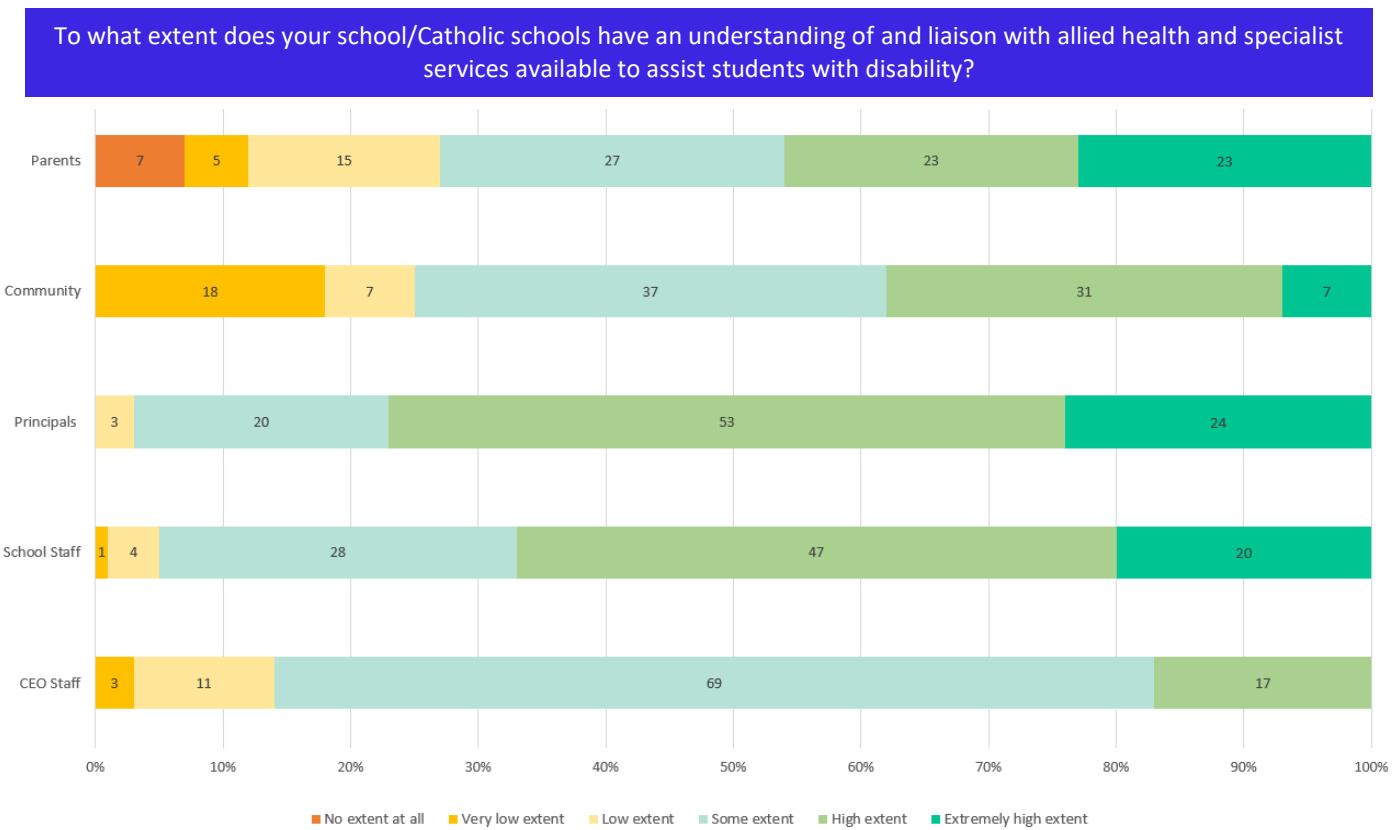
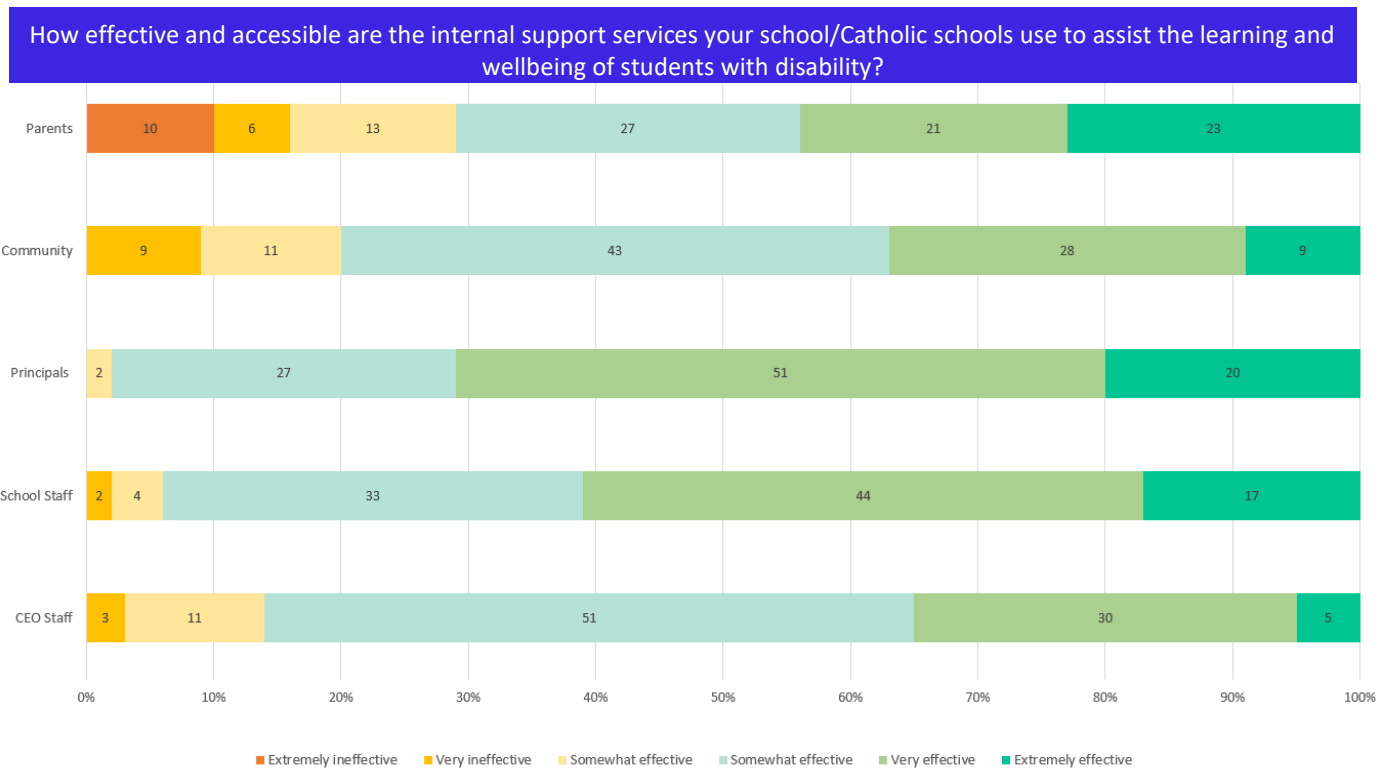
In addition there is the emergence of new special settings that sit alongside the existing structures.

The Review has identified a range of initiatives that, at the very least, should be addressed with regards to these issues. They include:

- a clear and coherent CESA statement as to the purpose, service provision and interrelationships between mainstream inclusion, special units, a combination of mainstream with special units, special settings, and special schools for students with disability
- a CESA Students with Disability strategy that provides several options for students and that are appropriately funded
- clear guidelines for matching the needs of students with disability with the options
- definition of the procedures, protocols and resource-use for the operation of these options
- recruiting more specialist teachers with qualifications in disability education to be located primary and secondary schools.
- purposeful professional learning programs for teachers in curriculum design, learning, explicit instruction and assessment adjustments for students with disability
- development of strategic alliances with allied health and multidisciplinary professionals to service provision to students and families and to strengthen the understanding of school staff about the interrelationship between disability, behaviour and learning
- the coordination of the above initiatives with schools, CESA's new regions and the Catholic Education Office to improve the inclusion, learning and wellbeing of students with disability.

Support services

Perspectives of key groups



Issues and challenges

Reports from allied health and other multidisciplinary professionals provide a depth of information that enhances understanding of the needs of students with disability.

Allied health professionals can include psychologists, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, or hearing and vision service providers. Other multidisciplinary professionals can include behaviour therapists, developmental educators, disability service providers (e.g. Autism SA, Novita), universities, professional associations (eg: SPELD), or other groups and organisations that serve the educational needs of people with disability.

The reports inform the level of adjustments needed for individual students. They also support collaboration between teachers and support staff to reach common goals.

Approximately seventy percent of parents express satisfaction at their school's ability to access appropriate support services to support their child's learning and wellbeing. They also express satisfaction at their school staff's ability to liaise and understand allied health personnel and their recommendations.

Most parents acknowledge the efforts of school staff to consult with them and action reports from therapists when implementing a child's personalised plan for learning.

Where parents express dissatisfaction, it is often with regards to how familiar teachers are with the reports and how they apply the reports to make adjustments for the student's learning.

For Principals there are issues as to how their school liaises with Allied Health and other multidisciplinary professionals and the arrangements by which these professionals have access to students.

Together with their Inclusion Coordinators, Principals also refer to the assistance that some parents need to understand the NDIS and what they need to do to access its services. This can be made more complex where the parents themselves also have a disability.

It is clear that all parties agree on the importance of having a clear relationship between students with disability and their families, NDIS service providers, and schools.

The central issue and challenge is how to define and strengthen the relationship.

The Review has identified a range of initiatives that, at the very least, can address this issue and challenge. They include:

- CESA negotiates strategic alliances with key NDIS service providers
- each strategic alliance is coordinated through collaborative arrangements between schools, CESA's new regions and the Catholic Education Office
- schools establish internal management arrangements to evaluate reports from allied health and other multidisciplinary professionals and to make decisions about those aspects of the reports requiring further liaison to assist students.

Conclusion

The Issues and Challenges paper presents two key findings of the Students with Disability Review:

- the majority of key stakeholders affirm that Catholic schools in South Australia are acting in accordance with the *Disability Standards for Education (2005)*
- a number of survey responses point to areas where Catholic schools in South Australia should strengthen their practices.

The paper highlights how the effective use of relevant data and information identifies existing practices that are to be affirmed, maintained and supported.

It further demonstrates how the analysis of data and information reveal those areas that can be strengthened.

The Issues and Challenges paper provides the foundation for the Students with Disability Review to identify and recommend the practices and structures that will best achieve improvement in the inclusion, learning and wellbeing of students with disability.