

## Disability: secret report exposes new wave

December 03, 2020

A confidential NSW government report has shed light on a critical and burgeoning challenge for public education as the number of students with disabilities is predicted to grow by 50 per cent in the decade to 2027.

A document said to inform the Department's disability strategy, obtained by Federation under freedom of information laws, reveals the public system will require twice as many specialist teachers and thousands more support classrooms to cope.

The modelling, commissioned by the Government in 2017 and conducted by Boston Consulting Group (BCG), had not been made public and outlines several deficiencies and dire predictions for the public school sector.

Notably, that the Department has under-estimated by 20,000 the number of students with disability enrolled in NSW, that Australian Bureau of Statistics projections suggest the number of students requiring funded support will rise by 50 per cent by 2027, the number of special classrooms will need to double, and at least 11,000 additional specialist staff will need to be hired.



At the same time, experts gave evidence to the independent Gallop inquiry into the value of teaching that the system would require a seismic change to involve partnerships with specialised assessment and intervention services.

Deputy President Henry Rajendra said the confidential report was alarming and revealed the Department's public version of the disability strategy, released last year, was woefully inadequate.

"The number of students with disability in mainstream classes has already increased by 500 per cent since 2002," he said. "In particular, schools report far higher numbers of students with autism and mental health issues."

"Now we learn that tens of thousands more students with disability are expected to enrol. The scale of the investment required in additional teachers, new classrooms, training and support staff is immense.

"One of the reasons we commissioned the independent Gallop inquiry was to ensure that we have a clear idea of how we need to support and pay teachers to ensure we can end the current shortages and meet the unprecedented growth in student numbers over the next two decades."

The "Valuing the teaching profession — an independent inquiry", chaired by former WA premier Geoff Gallop, was told the expectations that parents and the wider community place on teachers has put them on the very frontline of managing an emerging youth mental health crisis.

Prominent University of Sydney psychiatry professor Ian Hickie pointed to a documented, and “worrying”, rise in anxiety, depression and selfharm, among school students worldwide, at younger ages and for reasons that are not understood.

Professor Hickie said a change in thinking needed to be arrived at to deal with rising neuro-developmental issues, highlighting the need for partnerships between the education and health sectors at a systemic level.

“I think we have to develop better health services that actually work in partnership with schools because you need a whole range of more specialised services for assessment and then intervention,” he told the panel.

Professor Hickie said teachers who are already dealing with students’ emotional and social development problems — such as autism, anxiety, ADHD or disability — feel they have neither the skills nor the necessary support to cope.

“The pressure on teachers has gone up,” Professor Hickie, a director at the Brain and Mind Centre at the Sydney Medical School, said. “Teachers are on the frontline of recognition of this ... many of the calls for improvements in the response have come from teachers.”

“When you are faced with the consequences of this increasing challenge you feel you don’t have the skills or you don’t feel you are being supported in your key role then I think the emotional impact on teachers is much higher.”

The confidential BCG document obtained under freedom of information laws revealed:

- there were 150,000 students with disability in NSW public schools in 2017 — 1 in 5 students — around 20,000 more than was previously claimed by the Department
- the Department knows it is failing to deliver excellence for students with disability and that principals and teachers are inadequately supported to meet the growing complexity of student needs
- Departmental figures and ABS projections suggest the number of students with disability requiring funded support may increase by 50 per cent by 2027
- educating these children will require up to 11,000 additional specialist staff at a time where there are increasing shortages and an ageing workforce. This is on top of the extra 14,000 to 19,000 teachers required to meet overall student growth
- the number of support and special school classrooms may need to double, costing up to \$3 billion more. At least six new schools for specific purposes (SSPs) would need to be built a year — a program of building not factored into current plans
- the strategy suggests one option for reducing the number of extra classes it creates is to shift children from special schools to support classes and those in support classes into mainstream classrooms • another option was to increase overall class sizes.