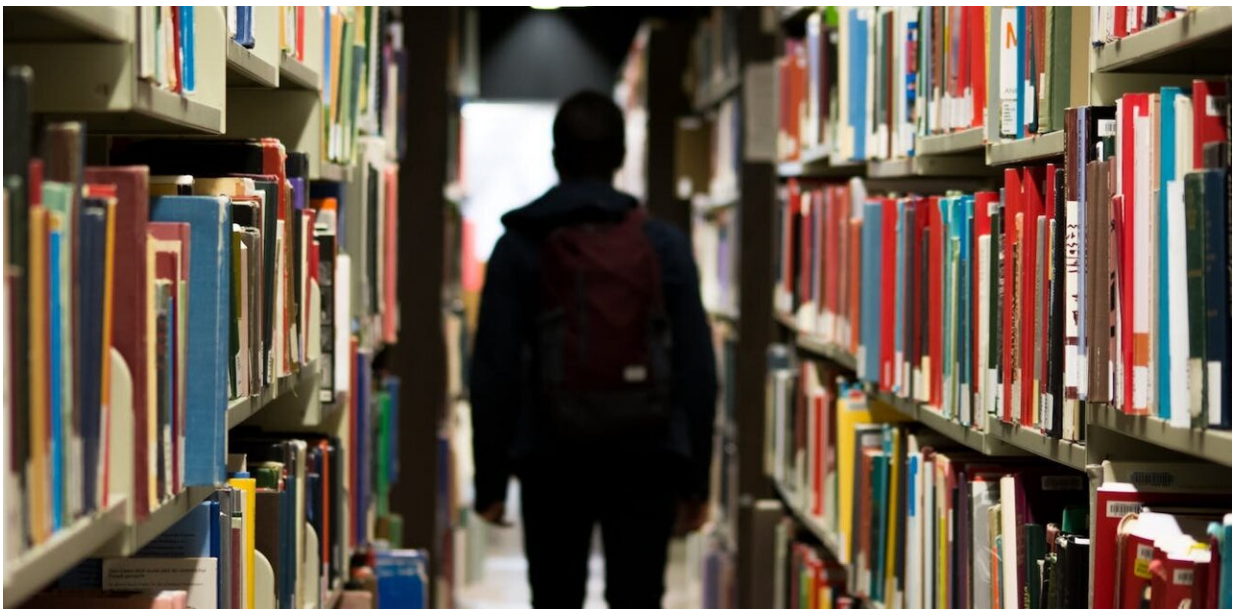


Of Australian students with a disability, 70% are excluded at school. Education reforms can fix this

September 18 2023, by Catherine Smith and Helen Dickinson



Credit: [Redd F/Unsplash](#)

The National School Reform Agreement is made about once every five years in Australia. This is the main way the federal government can steer changes in how Australian schools are run.

The current reform [agreement](#) ends in December 2024, and the new one is starting to be developed. One of the early [priorities](#) is to improve

outcomes for all students, "particularly those most at risk of falling behind." An [expert panel](#) will [deliver a report](#) to all education ministers by the end of October to inform negotiations.

Meanwhile, a wide-ranging [NDIS Review](#), looking at the sustainability of the scheme, is also due to report around the same time .

Earlier this month, Bruce Bonyhady, the chair of the independent review, said state governments need to build "[foundational supports](#)" in schools to reduce the strain on the NDIS. This [follows our recent research](#) that showed huge issues with the way students with disability are included in school life. For example, 70% of surveyed students with a disability report being excluded from events or activities at school.

Negotiations around the next school reform agreement alongside the NDIS Review provide a real opportunity to better educate and [support](#) students with disability.

What is the National School Reform Agreement?

The National School Reform Agreement is a [joint agreement](#) between the federal and state governments that aims to improve student outcomes across schools. It also deals with funding arrangements. Each state or territory makes its own agreement with the [federal government](#).

The Albanese government [extended the current agreement](#) by a year, with the new one due to begin in January 2025.

Within the bilateral agreements are activities that support particular student cohorts. But the current setup is not working adequately for students with disability.

In January this year, a Productivity Commission [review](#) noted many of

the bilateral agreements either did not include specific reform actions for students with disabilities, or did not include details of how this would happen. It also noted there is no NAPLAN data collected on students with disabilities—so it is very difficult to measure academic progress.

The commission suggested linking NDIS data to school reporting. While this would be welcome, it won't capture students with disabilities who are not part of the NDIS. And it won't capture the issues people face at the boundaries of the NDIS and education where there is debate over who should provide funding and support.

Unprecedented demand on the NDIS

Meanwhile, the NDIS is not necessarily able to provide the support school students need.

The NDIS was originally designed to provide funding to individuals with significant and permanent disabilities, estimated to be 10% of the [4.4 million](#) disabled Australians. Today, more than [610,000](#) individuals receive support from the scheme—around 14% of Australians with disability.

There has been a particular growth in terms of the number of children in the scheme. More than half of those in the NDIS are under 18 and [11% of five- to seven-year-old boys](#) are participants.

Some commentators have argued this is not sustainable, with the NDIS budget estimated to reach A\$35 billion this year.

Bonyhady says he believes the increase in numbers may be due to a [systemic issue](#). With limited supports outside the NDIS, parents are left with little choice but to try and secure a place on the scheme.

The NDIS was never intended to replace existing mainstream services such as education and health. But ambiguities about responsibilities for funding often lead to service gaps. [Our research](#) has consistently shown students with similar characteristics can receive inconsistent support, depending on:

- parents' and/or caregivers' understanding of nuances in the system
- the community support in the school the [student](#) attends
- the training of teachers and supports within that school, and
- school leadership decisions on allocation of disability support funding.

The importance of inclusive education

We know students with disability are not being properly included at school. As our [research](#) also found, 54% of those surveyed said they felt welcome, and only 27% felt supported to learn. On top of this, 65% of students reported experiencing bullying and 13% preferred not to answer.

Issues such as inadequate teacher preparedness, heightened risk of bullying, and experiences of exclusion can have [lifelong repercussions](#).

On the other hand, [if mainstream schools are inclusive](#), this can give students with disabilities friendships, higher aspirations and a richer learning experience.

Inclusive education also benefits those without disability. A [2021 meta-analysis](#) showed inclusion at all levels of education reduces discrimination, prejudice and hostility. Academically, results for all students in inclusive primary settings are better than, or equivalent to, non-inclusive settings.

So if we have well-funded, inclusive educational environments, we can not only enrich the academic and personal growth of students with and without a disability, but also alleviate the pressure on the NDIS.

What needs to happen now?

The next reform agreement needs to commit specific funding for the support of students with disability in their [school](#), and the development and training of their educators.

We also need a commitment to report properly on [students'](#) progress. This means progress is measured also at the individual level (involving individual learning plans), rather than simply against a developmental continuum.

Well-funded inclusive education is a [human right](#) and is crucial in setting up all young Australians for their future.

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