

NSW Audit: Supporting Students with Disability

In February 2024, InSpEd made a submission to the NSW Audit relating to the support for students with disability in NSW, we emphasised the need for appropriately qualified special educators to support students with disabilities in all settings, and the importance of having adequate training for special educators. We indicated our concern that the number of qualified special educators appears to be declining as evidenced by research conducted in Victoria, with increases in these numbers unlikely as the Department of Education in NSW, and indeed departments of education across Australia, do not require qualifications in special education (see, InSpEd Insights, March 2024 Edition). Concern about the quality of pre-service courses in special/inclusive education, specifically those approved by the NSW Department of Education, was also registered, suggesting that most of these courses did not include important content that has been supported in the research literature.

The recent report from this audit was critical of the NSW Department of Education's delay in implementing key initiatives that have been recommended following earlier inquiries and in failing to consistently monitor outcomes for students with disabilities. In considering the changes made by the NSW Department of Education since 2018, statements in the report suggest that the number of students with disability has increased substantially but families still do not feel supported. Given the decline in the number of special educators available to assist classroom teachers to provide evidence-based instruction and appropriate strategies to support social inclusion, this situation is likely to remain for the foreseeable future.

In the Audit report, reference was made to some key NSW Department of Education initiatives. One of them related to increasing the provision of inclusive education courses at tertiary level. State Departments cannot dictate the courses provided at tertiary level. They can encourage them by providing scholarships for teachers to complete these courses and indicating what content would be required if graduates were to be employed by the State Department of Education. Unfortunately, no reference was made about the concern InSpEd expressed in relation to the university courses approved by the NSW Department of Education. The professional learning referred to as part of the education initiative is unlikely to be of much support to general education teachers if not provided by the ever diminishing qualified special educators employed by the Department. Funding alone will not address this problem.