1. School site visit summary report

On Friday 14 June and Thursday 27 June 2024, Portfolio Committee No. 3 visited three schools across the Central Coast and Sydney to learn about each school's offering to its students with disability.

The schools were Terrigal Public School, Aspect Central Coast School, Terrigal, and St Justin's Catholic Primary School, Oran Park. At each school, the committee received a briefing by members of the school leadership team, observed classes in action and toured the school premises and facilities.

Some members of the committee also visited schools in their private capacity as members of Parliament. For example, Mr Anthony D’Adam visited St Lucy's School, Wahroonga on 14 June, and Ms Abigail Boyd and Mr Anthony D'Adam visited Passfield Park Primary School, Minto and Ajuga School for Specific Purposes, Glenfield on 27 June.

**Terrigal Public School and support unit**

* + On 14 June, Ms Abigail Boyd, Mr Mark Buttigieg, Mr Anthony D'Adam and Mrs Natasha Maclaren-Jones, visited Terrigal Public School and support unit. The committee met with the principal, Mr Michael Burgess, Ms Joanne Wilcher, Director, Educational Leadership, and student leaders Mia and Cameron.
  + The 916 students come from a range of language and cultural backgrounds, including 42 from an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background and 71 students with English as an additional language or dialect.
  + The school has 35 mainstream classes and three support classes (aka the Learning Hub). Twenty-seven students with disability attend the Learning Hub, which is staffed by two teachers, one Assistant Principal/teacher, and three School Learning Support Officers.
  + A total of 74.22 full-time equivalent staff are employed at the school.

**Educational approach**

* + The school prioritises evidence-based practice through the use of data to inform teaching and instructional support for every teacher.
  + Each student in the Learning Hub has a support plan and is able to participate in all school activities. Students build on strengths, with complementary activities including learning in the community, cooking and horseriding.
  + The Hub has a superheroes theme with classes named the Incredibles, Marvels and Avengers. The superhero theme is used for awards and other aspects of learning.

**Aspect Central Coast School, Terrigal**

* + On 14 June, Ms Abigail Boyd, Mr Mark Buttigieg and Mrs Natasha Maclaren-Jones visited Aspect Central Coast School, one of Aspect’s nine independent special schools. Every student enrolled at an Aspect school has a primary diagnosis of autism. At Central Coast School, approximately 95 per cent of students are categorised as either Level 2 or 3 ASD.
  + The Senior campus offers classes for Years 7–12 and each class has six students, one teacher and a teacher's aide.
  + The ratio of male to female students is 80:20. Approximately 9 per cent of students identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

**Educational approach**

* + The school uses autism-specific teaching methods. It is focused on equipping students with the skills to increase their independence and enabling them to transition into more inclusive settings.
  + At the centre of Aspect's approach is a Five Point Star tool, which focuses on individual student preferences for learning. Through collaboration, the school develops a profile that sets out the way the students process their thinking, identifies their preferred modes and styles of communication and outlines expectations for their engagement and learning. It also reflects student motivations and enables the school to plan for their sensory needs.
  + As a registered independent school, Aspect Central Coast also offers satellite classes in schools at Tuggerah, Gosford, Woy Woy and Toukley. The classes, which are operated by Aspect and supported by Aspect's teachers and teacher's aides, are small and deliver the Australian curriculum in conjunction with supporting each student's autism-related learning needs, strengths, and interests.
  + Integration activities are integral to Aspect's offering, with most students having integration goals in their individual plans. Students in satellite classes participate in integrated activities in the host school such as sports, excursion and student clubs, while students from mainstream schools are encouraged to participate in activities like Aspect-run camps and siblings' days.
  + Student transitions from Aspect's main schools to satellite settings, or from satellite classes into new settings, are carefully planned and have follow-up support.

**Staff training and development**

* + All Aspect school staff are provided with induction and ongoing training that builds knowledge, skills and understanding of working with autistic students. Professional learning programs are co-designed with people with autism and, in cases where the programs are face-to-face, are often facilitated by staff with autism.
  + Aspect Central Coast School staff have engaged in a range of other training, including mandatory and supportive training for safety intervention, and the Berry Street Educational Model to support their ‘trauma informed’ planning. Training and development is valued by staff and key to the success of Aspect’s education model.

**St Justin's Primary School, Oran Park**

* + On 27 June, Ms Abigail Boyd, Mr Anthony D'Adam and Ms Rachel Merton visited St Justin's Oran Park. The school is one of the newest Catholic primary schools in the Diocese of Wollongong. It has 826 students and 90 staff members. Ninety-five per cent of students identify as Catholic, 50 per cent of students have a language background other than English, and 11 per cent have English as an additional language.
  + The school's students have a diverse range of learning needs, with 19 students currently accessing the school's support classes. The school's Diverse Learning Team is a group of experienced educators who are available to support classroom teachers in catering to the diverse range of learning needs in their classroom.
  + St Justin’s also offers an alternative flexible education setting for students who have a primary diagnosis of autism or a cognitive disability (intellectual development disorder) and require intensive specialised interventions.

**Access to a support class**

* + The specialist setting – known as Mackillop – is viewed as an intervention for each student for a particular point in time in their learning.
  + For a student to be offered a placement in Mackillop, an appropriate validated diagnosis is required. Placement in this setting is completed in conjunction with the school’s enrolment process (which begins up to six months in advance). This involves specialist support from the diocese and regular consultation with a prospective student's family/caregiver.
  + The final decision around placement rests with a student's parents.
  + In exceptional circumstances, such as a need to support the safety of a student, a placement in a support class may occur (in consultation with the family and external professionals), where a diagnosis of disability does not exist.

**Reasons for placement in a support class**

* + The primary reasons students may be placed in a support class are to reduce the risk associated with:
* failure to thrive in a mainstream classroom environment
* having social and emotional skills that affect regulation, engagement and safety of self and others
* having sensory challenges that are impacted by the classroom and non-classroom environment
* the need for intensive individualised teaching and learning aligned to NSW curriculum outcomes, particularly in the areas of English and mathematics.

**Support unit aims**

* + The goal for each student who accesses Mackillop is to return to the general setting of the school, determined by individual needs, and in consultation with parents and carers.
  + Progress towards this is achieved through a gradual release model of support. With a reduced teacher/student ratio in the support class, students learn and practice new skills which are then transferred to classroom and non-class environments.
  + The development of student self-advocacy skills is a priority for students accessing a support class.
  + As much as possible, students accessing support classes participate in the educational, cultural, sporting, recreational and celebratory activities of the school with their peers (whether with or without disability).

**Liaison with families**

* + The school consults regularly with the families of prospective students to help them determine the appropriateness of placement and transition opportunities.
  + As key stakeholders, parents are involved in individual planning for their children.

**Resourcing**

* + Resourcing is determined by the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data Census (NCCD) by way of the government Student With Disability loading. The school is well-supported by NCCD supports.
  + The Diocese of Wollongong provides a staffing allocation for the positions of Diverse Learning Coordinator (secondary) and Diverse Learning Teachers (primary).
  + Establishment of support classes is financed by the Diocese and not through Student With Disability loading.
  + Individual student NDIS funding cannot be used in diocesan schools to support access and participation during school hours.

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**St Lucy's School, Wahroonga**

* + St Lucy’s is a K–12 co-educational independent Catholic school, open to students of all denominations across a range of disability. Approximately 85 per cent of students are in the Extensive range and 15 per cent in the Substantial range of Nationally Consistent Collection of Data.
  + Students belong to a class of eight or nine students. Each class at the main campus at Wahroonga has a specialist teacher and two teacher’s aides.
  + St Lucy's also offers satellite classes in mainstream primary schools for students to participate in special education programs within their classroom. Satellite students participate in the NESA curriculum at their level while working towards transition to their next setting – usually a mainstream school with a support unit or a mainstream class setting.
  + St Lucy’s classroom staff work in collaboration with a team which includes occupational therapists, speech pathologists, behaviour practitioners and a psychologist. St Lucy’s staff also work with each student’s external professionals.

**Facilities – primary school**

* + The Dominic Centre for primary students includes 16 state-of-the-art classrooms with complementary learning spaces, kitchen facilities and modern assistive and augmented technology.
  + It also includes two ‘Changing Places’ bathrooms with showering facilities and two fully accessible bathrooms with hoists. There is one lift so that all levels of the building and underground car park are accessible.
  + There is an inground pool, gymnasium, and purpose-built playground at the Wahroonga campus.

**Inside the primary classroom**

* + Each student has an Individual Education Program and is supported to participate in their NESA education at their level.
  + A one-on-one evidence-based Reading Tutor Program in literacy is offered, working with students and a specialised teacher, supported by trained volunteers.
  + The Creative Arts Program is facilitated by a team of professional artists- in-residence. Students spend time each week in the Angelico Centre for Creative Arts, which includes visual arts, music, dance and drama studios.
  + Personal development, health and physical education programs are taught by specialised teachers.

**Beyond the primary classroom**

* + St Lucy's students participate in several programs with nearby schools:
* The **Knox Buddy Program** offers students the chance to broaden their social and play skills, and make new friends from the neighbouring Knox Grammar school.
* The **PLC Robotics Program** offers students with an interest in coding and engineering the opportunity to work in collaboration with mainstream peers on STEM projects.
* The **Abbotsleigh Combined Arts Program** provides students with an opportunity to work shoulder-to-shoulder with mainstream peers in artmaking and exhibition programs.

**Inside the secondary classroom**

* + Each student has an Individual Education Program or Individual Transition Program. The curriculum includes the NESA Life Skills curriculum, VET programs and meaningful recreational, independence and work opportunities, in preparation for post-school life.
  + VET Programs in Stage 5 and 6 prepare students for the workplace and give them an opportunity to gain or work towards a trade qualification.

**Beyond the secondary classroom**

* + A **Community Participation Program** focuses on building students' work and recreational capacity and opportunities, helping students to pursue authentic involvement in the community including in the arts and social arenas.
  + A **Post School Options Coordinator** works with students and families to create meaningful connections with workplaces and services to ensure a successful transition to life beyond school.
  + The **Family Support Worker** collaborates with families in accessing skill building, respite and other services in their local area, and NDIS planning and support.

**Across K-12**

* + St Lucy’s has a Student Wellbeing Framework and Social and Emotional Learning Program designed by a team of specialised staff for all students to participate. The program aims to strengthen students' sense of self, their mental and emotional health and their relationships with peers and the school community.

**Passfield Park School, Minto**

* + Passfield Park School is a purpose-built K–12 school offering educational programs to support students with disability. Students have a primary diagnosis of autism, or of intellectual disability, and 82 per cent of students have both. Seventy per cent of students are non-verbal. Four students use wheelchairs.
  + The school has a capacity of 103 students and a full-time equivalent staff load of 48. Students come from diverse backgrounds⎯four students identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and 68 students have English as an additional language or dialect. In the last four years, 37 per cent of students have come from a Nepalese or Bangladeshi background.

**Educational approach**

* + The ethos of the school is 'know your students and how they learn'. Class sizes are determined by the level of disability, with a mix of moderate and severe disability and ages in the same class.
  + Every class has a Student Learning Support Officer (SLSO). Basic skills, such as sitting at a desk, may need to be taught.
  + Six students are currently being transitioned to other schools. Which school a student is assigned to is a decision of the Department. Each student in year 3 is reviewed to see if they are ready to be in a less restrictive environment.

**Student and family support**

* + The school takes a holistic, pragmatic and flexible approach to student support, providing vulnerable children with meals and spaces to rest or sleep during school hours, as needed.
  + An Out of Home Care program supports students where parental, accommodation and/or educational responsibility is held by the Minister for Families, Communities and Disability Services. The school is supported to enhance the learning and wellbeing of students who are in, or entering, statutory Out of Home Care.
  + The school also assists families through providing a secure environment for their children and through advocacy.

**Special programs**

* + The school supports students with a range of assistance including a heated hydrotherapy program specifically designed for the use of people with severe and multiple disabilities to assist with massage, exercise, sensory regulation, vestibular movement and increased limb movement and strengthening. All classes use the pool weekly, with identified students receiving additional sessions for wellbeing and/or sensory regulation, to increase their learning potential.
  + The school’s charity, PPS Kids Inc, supports the employment of a music therapist two days per week, who works with all classes and students across the school. The program is fully interactive, encourages speech through music, and offers calming strategies for students with additional needs.
  + An Aboriginal Culture Program operates one day per week with nine different classes. Fully differentiated programs have been designed to enrich student knowledge and understanding of First Nations peoples. The program is led by an SLSO, who is also a local Aboriginal person.
  + The school has a Community Liaison Officer (CLO) two days per week who works directly with parents, carers, NDIS and the local community to improve outcomes and the lives of students with significant disability, and their families. The CLO assists families with NDIS services, Centrelink and disability programs, supporting and empowering families to advocate for their child. The school also subsidises community programs to provide food hampers and care packages where needed.

**Ajuga School for Specific Purposes, Glenfield**

* + Ajuga School offers a safe space to students with complex trauma backgrounds. Located in south-west Sydney, the school has 63 students from Kindergarten to Year 12. There are currently nine classes – five primary and four secondary classes.
  + Ajuga has a diverse student community drawn from more than 50 schools across south-western Sydney. Thirty-eight per cent of students identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and 25 per cent have a language background other than English.
  + As the school is located in heritage buildings, building modifications are restricted, making accessibility an issue. Further, the site's history also poses a barrier for people from First Nations backgrounds.
  + There are 12 teaching staff and 11 non-teaching staff. Each class is supported by a teacher and a School Learning Support Officer.

**Educational approach**

* + Having previously used a Positive Behaviour Learning (PBL) model, Ajuga has now adopted the Berry Street education model, informed by Ross Greene's trauma-informed approach.
  + Trauma-informed practice comes from the health sector and is new to education. There has been a reduction in suspensions since its implementation. Student and staff wellbeing and engagement remains a priority.
  + During their time at Ajuga, students are supported to work towards transitioning back to a mainstream setting within 18 months.

**Programmes and partnerships**

* + Punchbowl High School helps with ATAR preparation for students who wish to complete high school.
  + Some senior students are undertaking TAFE VET courses.
  + Students learn gardening skills and grow award-winning pumpkins. There is also a mini-Woolworths on site.
  + A weekly sustainability class is held in conjunction with Georges River Environmental Education Centre.

**Coming up**

* + With the renovation of the school kitchen nearly complete, the school expects to soon offer a barista course, and training in catering to students.