

## FACT 1:

# Students Belong and Benefit from Attending Local Schools

*Findings from the research project:*

*“Successful School Experiences for Victorian Students with Cerebral Palsy in Local School Communities”<sup>1</sup>*

## KEY MESSAGE: Students value being like everyone else.

**Genuine friendships represented success for students. Students with cerebral palsy developed skills and abilities over time and often at a different rate or in a different way to other students, and this progress was recognised as legitimate and an achievement.**

**Study results demonstrated that all participants valued the students with disabilities’ opportunity to learn alongside their peers, and peers valued having students with different abilities in class and the school community. For every experience, there were key people who helped, promoted, problem solved or orchestrated making a difference for students and their families. Similarly, all participants valued encouragement and support, particularly students and teachers.**



*“We work really hard with the school community and all of the other students accepting everybody. So not just kids on the program for students with disabilities, but anyone who happens to come to the school ...If someone walks through the school ground who looks a little bit different then no one should really be looking twice at them. We generally find the kids are usually good at that, the adults are a little bit more challenging. So if we have parents or visitors, they’re the ones who will look twice rather than many of our students...That to me is a sign of a successful program if there’s lots of kids and no one’s really looking twice.” **Principal***

*“...every person in my school knows my name. I don’t know how, but they just do and everyone says hello to me and I say hey back. So it’s kind of good that everyone gets along with me and I get along with them, so I quite enjoy it.” **Teenager with CP, spastic quadriplegia—GMFCS level 5***

## Conclusions & Recommendations

- 1. Students with cerebral palsy, physical disabilities and complex communication needs (CCN) can and do attend local schools.** Students make friends, enjoy school, learn alongside their peers and develop a sense of independence and belonging that is highly valued by students and their families. Therefore, the preparation of students and families before school begins, efforts by schools and external agencies, and the dedication and hard work contributed by families are all worthwhile actions and aims. Students should be encouraged to communicate with family and school staff to both identify their needs and find appropriate solutions when issues of access and involvement arise.



*“I think the kids are really good with [student with CP] they want her to be included. So that certainly helps. We as teachers, we want [student] to be included as much as possible”* **Teacher**

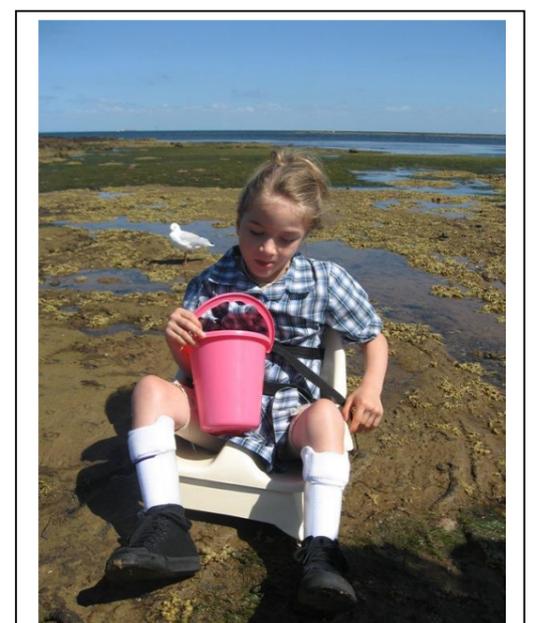
*“She engages with her peers, staff love her, students love her, she’s fun. She’s really not disadvantaged by having cerebral palsy, she just isn’t learning in the same way that the other children are learning.”* **Principal**

*“Do you like going to art and craft? Yes. Do you like the reading? Yes. Do you like it when you do some maths with numbers? Yes. You like that too. Do you like it when you have to pick out different letters of the alphabet? Oh, you like that too. Do you like going outside to play? Yes. Do you like it – do they take you to go see the chickens? Do you like the chickens? Yes. What’s your favourite one, Katherine? Is it the singing? Is it the numbers? Or playtime? So that’s the singing, the numbers or playtime? Playtime. Playtime? Is that because it’s with your friends? Yep <laughter>.”* **Student with CP, spastic quadriplegia-GMFCS level 5, and Complex Communication Needs**

*“...Behaviourally he’s had a lot to learn. Since he’s become so verbal with his communication device, it’s opened up a whole range of ways for him to disrupt the class, deliberately, like be naughty...[But] he’s learning the rules. That you can’t start singing “happy birthday” in the middle of class time. He gets disciplined, and it’s really good for him to be treated normally.”* **Mother of student with CP, spastic quadriplegia--GMFCS level V, visual impairment with CCN**

- 2. With training and support, teachers and aides can adapt, modify, tailor and offer innovative solutions to the daily curriculum issues that arise for students with disabilities.** When educators have access to experts, collaborate with a student’s family, receive adequate and appropriate support from school leadership, and receive training, teachers can and do create great and appreciated school experiences for students with disabilities. Therefore, teachers must have access to education and experts who work with them inside schools providing professional development, so that teachers can feel confident to involve students with disabilities in both curricular and extracurricular school activities.

*“When this little boy has been sick, she’s [class teacher] been absolutely amazing. He’s [student with CP] had to stay at home some days... So [his class teacher] had been giving him work at home through email. So he’s actually learnt to logon at home. He’s in grade 2. He’s brilliant. He’s emailing her. He’ll write the emails. It takes him a long time, but he actually can take that time to do it. Every week, she’ll be Skyping three or four times. He will present his work to the children in the classroom. They would present work and he would see them presenting work. So he’s been included like that and I just take my hat off to her because that’s a lot of extra organisation for her, but it’s such a great learning experience for him.”*  
**Principal**



**3. School leadership is a cornerstone to creating and sustaining whole of school inclusive attitudes that celebrate diversity and difference in the school community.** All stakeholders (teachers, aides, parents, students, allied health practitioners) are reliant on strong school leadership. They need this to respond to school enrolments, address staff training and development, and navigate service purchase and use that supports the school to include and directly assist the child. Enabling communication and collaboration brings success for all.

*“So I have always been very welcoming of anyone and my point has always been about how we can make sure that the environment that the child is going into is the best for their learning.” Principal*

*“Inclusion is about not noticing the disability but focusing on the ability. So in the environment, in the classroom, socially, they’re just one of the kids.” Principal*

*“I think just be able to do as much as you can with the assistance that you’ve got. No matter how much your disability, how strong, how much it affects you or not. What you should try and do is to try and get the most out of that and if you can, use your aide as little as you can as well because I would only call them in and say, “Oh can you help me with this?” very, very little. But it’s just trying to – you know, not just for school, but just generally do as much as you can. Get out and do stuff. And on the friends side of thing as well, not to be shy as well and to get out there and get to know people and enjoy life really – that’s the main thing.” Student with Athetoid CP and Complex Communication Needs*

**4. Allied health experts are recognised as useful providers and essential experts.** Experts can and do assist teachers, aides and schools to make appropriate and reasonable accommodations and adaptations that will enable individualised success for students, particularly in the areas of communication, physical access and modifications of tools and curriculum, technology and timetabling. Allied health practitioners must be aware of the culture and processes within schools to respectfully and effectively collaborate and consult with students, families and school staff. This will make a difference to the student’s capacity to access curriculum, make friends and achieve health and participation. Schools should be inclusive of allied health practitioners as key team members who can and do provide services to students and their families before, during and after the school years.

*“In many of the schools where inclusion has been really successful, it’s from the principal and the attitude of the staff. They may not have had a student with complex communication needs and a physical disability before but if they’re open to learning, open to problem solving and as a team it makes the whole process such an enjoyable experience for all. Then I think the other part of that is having good therapy support to come in and support training of the teacher and the aides and to support them with their knowledge. Teachers have such a huge amount of knowledge on education and many of the students might have individual learning plans but how can we tap into that teacher’s knowledge and support them with setting goals and curriculum modifications. So it’s a big team effort.” Occupational therapist*



**5. Schools cannot build up expertise to assist students alone.** Students and school communities often embrace students with disabilities. Physical accessibility, knowledge and use of student’s particular communication methods or needs, and social participation must be carefully addressed through a strategic plan. This includes appropriate experts, i.e. speech pathologists trained in alternative augmentative communication, occupational therapists trained in technology and switch access, and physiotherapists with expertise in childhood physical disability. Collaborations with the same aim – a successful school experience for the student – should underpin all interactions between schools and external experts and agencies.

*“You’re [parents/allied health] looking for somewhere where they’re [the school are] much more interested in celebrating each individual’s...[capabilities]... they’re actually focussed on the whole child. They’re focussed on enabling that person to do the best that they can do...they can celebrate each individual...you have to have people who can celebrate small achievements.”* **Speech pathologist**

*“Wanting to go to school, having friends, using your communication system, having things to say, and learning. Key indicators of success? Yeah that's it.”* **Speech pathologist**

*“A successful attitude for the child starts very early “I think we need to give these guys opportunities for success so that they can develop. I suppose it’s a self-worth, a self-efficacy that they see themselves as an integral part of the community. I think we have to develop that from a really early age...early intervention, kinder...before they even go to school, yes, absolutely”* **Occupational therapist**

**6. Student and family involvement is crucial.** In order for students to become involved and confident learners in the classroom, teachers, aides and external support (allied health or other specialists) might emphasise what the student is achieving and has achieved, as well as planning how the students’ progress will continue.

*“Sometimes they think that they need to hold her back from something and she surprises them and just wants to have a go anyway. So I think that's a good attitude. I don't think she sees herself as any different to any other kid to not know that she can do it or be entitled to it or try it...Yeah, even the athletics day I think they did a bit of golf, a bit of everything and she just had a go. She doesn't worry if it's not the best...”* **Mother of student with CP, spastic diplegia-GMFC level II**

*“There’s really not anything she can really think of that she doesn’t like about school. I think art maybe because it’s in a different classroom, a different area of school. She does find those kind of things very challenging but when she gets there she loves it.”* **Mother of student with motor difficulties and CCN**

*“She loves art...Things like painting and things, her fine motor control is obviously not fantastic but she has a lot of assistance and she loves art, she loves music on the instruments and things. She has performed in both our school productions and we just had our Christmas carols on Monday...with the support of an aide she follows along all the actions to the best of her ability.”* **Teacher**



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