

### FACT 3:

## Classroom Enablers who Help Students Succeed in 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:** Inspired and skilled teachers and aides make a substantial difference to students’ access to curriculum, social participation and the whole school community

The research indicated that teachers and aides needed training and education though outside agencies like the Cerebral Palsy Education Centre (CPEC). Skilled and appropriately experienced allied health professionals were very helpful, if not crucial, to student and school success.

All supports needed to be implemented with proactive and ongoing planning and communication between families, the school and outside services—allied health and others. Speech pathologists, occupational therapists and physiotherapists supported the student’s participation in class and within the school.



*“It’s about them [teachers] getting that confidence...that positive attitude. How can we do this? Not—‘Oh, all the problems’. Yeah, there’s going to be issues but let’s sort through them, how can we do them? It’s also about matching children to the right teachers. It’s about matching families to teachers and aides... the core of our success is we believe all children have the right to learning, to quality education, to be the best they can be.” **Principal***

*“One of my other favourite subjects is cooking...my school rebuilt the whole kitchen so they have one particular spot where I can fit under the table and I can see the oven. Before the oven was like a bit too high...[adapted] utensils and equipment, so that really helps me because I can see what I’m doing... someone helps me, it’s kind of like a two man team... we work together and it’s really fun.” **Teenager with CP, spastic quadriplegia—GMFCS level 5***

## Conclusions & Recommendations

- 1. Students with cerebral palsy, physical disabilities and complex communication needs 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. Students should be encouraged to be aware and available to communicate with family and school staff to both identify their needs and find appropriate solutions when issues of access and involvement arise.



*"I have a special chair for reading...I also have a board because if I don't have the board, my Aides are worried I'll slump down. So I'm up higher. I have a pencil grip that I like using, but I don't like writing, not really, ...It's easier to use a computer for me."*  
Student with CP, spastic quadriplegia and visual impairment

*So we modify our excursions to include her in them. It hasn't impacted in any way whatsoever. We go to the zoo, so we get a bus that has wheelchair access...that doesn't impact on excursions, it's not like she can't come to anything. Swimming was a challenge in terms of getting changed and that was right at the beginning of the year, so we did need mum's support for a lot of that, and the support staff to help out with that. From excursions, she gets out of it the same experience that a lot of the other children get out of it. It's just hard for her to communicate it back." Teacher*

- 2. Families play a crucial, substantial, ongoing and sometimes difficult role in advocating, organising and navigating the school system on behalf of their child.** With the help of skilled allied health practitioners who know their child, and with structured support from an agency like the Cerebral Palsy Education Centre (CPEC), families can develop skills and contribute substantially to the school's capability to achieve successful participation. Schools should recognise and embrace the role of families in the inclusion of students with disabilities in every practical sense throughout the child's schooling. Families need to be mindful of school cultures and processes that influence teachers. Families may offer their knowledge, share skills and provide a reciprocal support to teachers and school staff, particularly during student transitions (into and between schools).

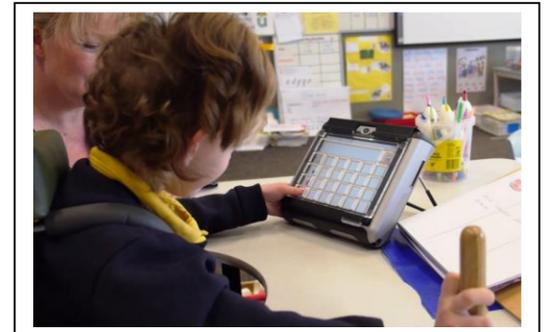
*"Success for [my child] is to be integrated in every facet of the school day. So every subject that she does, she can participate and the curriculum has to be changed and modified for her to be part of that classroom. For her, to be sitting in the same classroom, or on the sport field doing something with her peers, I think is success." Mother to student with motor difficulties and Complex Communication Needs*

*"They do need to have a good policy in place whereby the teachers can interact with somebody that could help them modify the curriculum so that our children can have good access to the curriculum...it's very tricky but that's fundamentally important I think...They're not doing terribly different things from their peers, they're doing the same thing but it just needs to be adapted." Mother to young adult with spastic quadriplegia CP--GMFCS level 5 & Complex Communication Needs*



**3. 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 and as professional development, so that teachers can feel confident to involve students with disabilities in both curricular and extracurricular school activities.

*"The aides are extremely important. I mean, when I think about children with CP...a big, big plus for the aides is having those connections with the therapist...I think it's really important to acknowledge the work that they do... It can be really physically tiring, it can be really emotionally tiring, so acknowledging that it is a big job what they do and having that opportunity for them to have down time as well, is I think really, really important."* **Speech pathologist**



*"I use a lot of visual support to help communicate...I spend a lot of time modifying our activities to help [student with CP] succeed in the classroom.*

*When we explain things, it's as simple as when you explain something to the whole class, taking the time afterwards to check in with [student] and make sure that she understands, obviously for that recall, it can be a bit difficult for her to keep up with it. I always try and get her to communicate back to me, using her PODD book rather than just a nod or a no, or something like that. It's just small things that you just happen to put in place once you know her more and you know her limitations a little bit better."* **Teacher**

*"I did one unit of special education at university, where we looked at cerebral palsy for probably a week, but that's all that I have had...So I did feel very limited at the beginning as to how I'd go about teaching. I would probably say my professional knowledge is the biggest limitation."* **Teacher**

*"[After my daughter selected her subjects, her] aides in this school...had essentially selected what subjects they are good at and what they are comfortable working with a child with. They follow her through on those subjects...they have got continuity in the way they work with her. One will work on English. She will always do English with [student]. She never comes into the classroom not knowing what was done the previous day or class...they have all got continuity and that has turned out to be extremely important."*

**Mother to teenager with motor difficulties and CCN**

**4. 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 to respond to school enrolments, address staff training and need for upskilling, navigate service use and purchase of services that will support the school to include the child; as well as directly assisting the child, and to enable communication and collaboration that enables success for all.

*"Some teachers just do it and they're awesome. Others leave it to the aides, which is wrong. Some have whole brilliant schedules mapped out with short-term goals, long-term goals...all sorts of problem solving happens in a good classroom...There are so many, many things that a good teacher does."* **Speech pathologist**



*"[The students] all have their blackboards and he has his table. Well I try as much as I can to not just say 'Get your blackboards'. I try and say 'Get your blackboards or tables'...just saying oh if you're a person who has a blackboard get a blackboard, if you're a person who has a table get a table...he is the only one [with a table], but hopefully just making him go 'Actually yeah I'm okay. I am allowed to need something different and that's fine.'" **Teacher***

**5. Allied health experts are recognised as useful providers and essential experts.** They 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 need to be aware of the culture and processes within schools to respectfully and effectively collaborate and consult with students, families and school staff in ways that will make a difference to the student's capacity to access curriculum, make friends and achieve health and participation. Schools should also 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.

*"My art teacher would know what she wanted me to do in class. I liked her very much because she would come to me and chat to me and work out how I could do my work. I really enjoyed it. The teacher came up to me and spoke to me and [did] not speak to the Aides. My first woodwork teacher didn't want me in class. She was very, very worried because she thought I was going to hurt myself or someone. She was Health and Safety Officer. In year eight, my woodwork teacher was fantastic because he wanted to help me be included in woodwork. So he got together with occupational therapists to have them help me. So they worked out what it is that I will do in class and modify the equipment."* **Teenager with Athetoid cerebral palsy and Complex Communication Needs**



*"So normally in the classroom the children come in early...they're settling in, they're doing some developmental play or playing games with their friends in the classroom, they're getting to chat to the teacher and I suppose quietly adjusting to the environment. For [prep student with CP] that's been really important for him to have that social connection... So half the room might go out and then half stay in the classroom for focused literacy sessions. Again, it's been really important to pre-plan and get his choices organised so that we can facilitate those nice social development activities for him as seamlessly as possible. Having the wheelchair and movement issues you've got to be adaptable..."* **Teacher**

**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) should emphasise what the student is achieving and has achieved, as well as planning how the students' progress will continue.

*"With her reading we're focusing more on tracking for reading because she can't read out loud so we're teaching her to read in her head and so she does this when she's reading the words in her head...she's tracking with her fingers as somebody else is reading... Maths is probably the activity or the area that she is strongest... it's so hands on that she is able to do a lot of the things... maths has probably been the thing that's been the most adaptable."* **Teacher**

*"Well, a lot of people think I'm just in there to do some exercises and they're actually quite chuffed to find you're there to help them... if your aide staff and your teaching staff know that this is your goal for the child for the term, if your goal for the child is to walk a certain distance in a walker and you go to the SSG [Student Support Group Meeting] and its included in the student's learning plan, everyone recognises that this is now an important part of the curriculum. You problem solve when to put it into the timetable, it gets practised, the child is learning to control their body, the child is keeping a healthy body, they're building strength, they're building control. And everyone's happy and particularly the child. They're taking steps forward if you'll forgive the pun."* **Physiotherapist**

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*This information sheet has been compiled following a research project called: Successful school experiences for students with cerebral palsy. The William Buckland Foundation proudly sponsored the study. Dr Helen Bourke-Taylor, researcher and occupational therapist and Ms Claire Cotter, Manager of Cerebral Palsy Education Centre (CPEC) collaborated to produce the findings contained in this fact sheet. The research project was a qualitative study that involved interviewing 47 people about their perspective of the experience of students with cerebral palsy in local schools. The rigorous research involved analysis of interviews: 7 students; 11 parents; 10 teachers; 9 principals; 10 allied health therapists. This fact sheet is number 3 of a set of 6 fact sheets. Each fact sheet summarises one theme that was derived from the data that represented the collective experience of participants. The fact sheets may be downloaded from the CPEC website (<http://www.cpec.org.au/>).*