

**FACT 4:**

**Communication is Crucial to Success for Students 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:** All forms of communication among families, school staff and external organisations or allied health professionals make the systems of support around students with disabilities more effective and efficient

The research found that communication was informal (emails, phone conversations, chats) or formal, such as meetings and Student Support Group meetings. Altogether a collaborative team approach involving teachers, aides, parents and allied health was essential. Further, when a student had complex communication needs, the speech pathologist played a crucial role in enabling the child to access communication and the curriculum, including literacy and social participation with other students. Occupational therapists and physiotherapists supported the student’s participation in class and also the education and up-skilling of school staff as well.



*“My message to parents would be you have to support your child’s communication. Without my communication, I would not have independence. It is important to charge your child’s communication device every night, have the communication device all the time and do modelling on it so you can teach your child how to use that and different words to use.”*

**Teenager with Athetoid CP & Complex Communication Needs**

*“And so for my child, I think education is about being a great communicator [using Pragmatic Organisation Dynamic Display (PODD) book] and being a part of a community and being able to express yourself when you have something to say.”*

**Mother to student with spastic quadriplegia CP -GMFCS level 5, Complex Communication Needs and medical conditions**

## 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.

*“The teacher and I have a handover at the beginning of the day and at the end of the day. Really my main focus curriculum wise is building up his language... I’ve worked with the class. Like, for example they did a unit topic which was Indigenous Australians. So we went into the class, and we brainstormed all the words that the kids in the class could think of to do with it. The aides and the teachers weren’t involved. But all the kids came up with all the words that they could think of to do with it. And then I put them into groupings, and took them home, put them onto the right format on a piece of paper, and then we went back to school, and the kids actually programmed the device. So that he had [vocabulary], and this was before the subject has even started... programming the device so that he’s got the vocab, and continuing to work on the device because we’re still transitioning to a more complicated [vocabulary on the dynavox].”*

**Mother to student with CP -GMFCS level 5, visual impairment with Complex Communication Needs.**

*“... They’ve [other class members] just been amazing with [student with CP]. They’ve just been fantastic. They always say ‘Where’s [name]? I need to sit next to [name]’ and if they get to sit on her table it’s like fantastic. They communicate with the book with her all the time. She’s just so much a part of our classroom that it just doesn’t feel right if she’s not there. They are a lovely little class. [student with CP] probably helps a lot with creating a lot of that positivity in the classroom because they are so aware of her and they have learnt so much about children with special needs and, yes, she’s in a wheelchair but she’s still our friend and she’s our classmate. I think they’ve really built an amazing understanding.”* **Teacher**

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

*“[My son] is the only child with a wheelchair at the school... And I think what makes it so successful, is the people, the teachers. It was really hard at the start because they didn’t know [my son] they didn’t know the family, it was really hard for us to, you know, constant meetings trying to sort of make them understand where we’re coming from... Well, this year’s been a lot easier... They’ve got education learning plans set up, they know the goals. He follows the curriculum...it is teamwork, it’s not just one thing, it’s the teachers that actually really make it work and willing to work with us and obviously the fact that we’re so across with what [my son]’s doing.”*

**Mother to teenager with CP -GMFCS level 5**



*“So for a child who is transitioning into school, initially what we’ll do is a lot of communication partner training. Which is helping the aides, or the people who will be regular communication partners, learn how to use the child’s [communication] system.”* **Speech pathologist**

*“The communication and talking to one another and sharing information that you have, and sharing the child’s successes, and not just always communicating about the challenging aspects of teaching their child. I think that’s a key thing to having a positive relationship [with the parents].”* **Teacher**

**3. 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 in ways that will make a difference to the student's capacity to access curriculum, make friends and achieve health and participation. Schools might 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.

*"So we have what we call SSG meetings... basically [student with CP] has his own set of goals for his learning, separate to all the other children's goals and we meet with the OTs and the speech paths and...physiotherapist, mum, myself, the aides and the integration aide coordinator... Every term we meet to discuss [student with CP]'s goals and update them"*

**Teacher**



*"I do find that the biggest thing with friendships is helping people, parents as well sometimes, see the difference between everybody being nice to them and saying they're a friend and people knowing them, and this is critical with kids who have complex communication needs who use AAC [Alternative & Augmentative Communication]. If the child has language ...and needs to use an AAC system to express themselves, you can't really be their friend unless they can use it with you because you can be friendly but you can't know them... How do you know your friend if they can't talk to you? Sometimes [I hear] 'Oh yes [student] has lots of friends.' So clarifying what we mean by lot of friends, do we mean a bunch of kids who're around them and being nice to them and involving them which is one level and fine and great. But the other level, is that child truly expressing themselves so that they can have a genuine friendship with the person, rather than being nice and [not] reciprocal"* **Speech Pathologist**

**4. Schools cannot build up expertise to assist students alone.** Students and school communities often embrace students with disabilities, although physical accessibility, knowledge and use of student's particular communication methods or needs, and social participation must be carefully addressed through a strategic plan that includes appropriate experts. This may include 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.

*"I'm supporting students with severe and multiple disabilities, most of them are in wheelchairs. Some of them have some speech, but none of them have speech as the primary mode of communication. My job is to ensure that they have the vocabulary to interact with their peers and the curriculum just like their classmates. My other job is to make sure that they have literacy goals that are realistic and I help structure literacy programs because in a mainstream school, I'm usually working with a teacher who is not special education trained and doesn't know how to do it. That's my job!"* **Speech pathologist**

**5. Open, transparent, and respectful communications are mandatory** for all involved in the team that supports a student with disability who attends local school.

*“I think for teachers, contact the student, the integration staff and the parent and get as much knowledge from them as you can so you know who your student is and you know what they’re doing...the same as if you know some able-bodied kid – you’ve got to get to know their parents in their situation as well” Teenager with hemiplegia CP -GMFCS level 2*

*“So, communication with the school, I put that down first... And that it’s only going to happen through communication [as you] know your child the best...” Mother to teenager with hemiplegia CP -GMFCS level 2*

*“From my point of view, that communication with the families is really important right from the beginning. We’re not the perfect school, we’re not going to have all the answers. We’re going to make mistakes. I try to have that sort of conversation with the families from the beginning. I try and think really flexibly in our approaches--no two children will have the same transition program or the same classroom program or the same communication with the parents.” Principal*

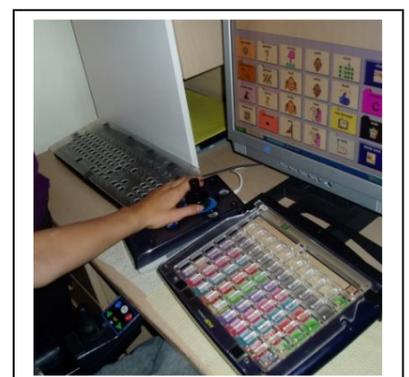
**6. School communities are places where all children can thrive and all children should feel welcomed and valued.** In order for students to feel welcomed and safe, other students, teachers and the whole community must show respect and accommodations for the students mobility needs, communication methods, self-care needs and education needs. Practical measures such as using and including a child’s communication system in and outside class are an essential feature of a successful school experience for any student.

*“I try and be as absolutely natural as possible with him and speak to him like I would speak to any other child and I ...actually do just consider him another child in the classroom. I speak to him directly and I know that he understands everything that I say because I get vocalisation and smiles and, of course, communication through his book when we have a conversation... If he’s using the Dynavox he’ll use movement with his head to move the cursor” Teacher*

**7. Organisations such as CPEC are centres for excellence with considerable expertise in low incidence disabilities such as cerebral palsy, associated conditions, and complex communication needs.** Such organisations offer long term services to students with disabilities and their families before school entry, across the school years and after school completion. Families identify such services as essential to their child’s health development and participation in daily activities. School staff identify services as useful in preparing schools to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities, and enabling success at school.

*“...communication right across the board...people have got to know what’s going on...we support the parent at times too when things are pretty tough... and they support us when we need assistance as well....also there’s the expertise of being able to go to someone like CPEC and say, “Look, we’re having difficulties. What do you reckon?” But also, the local paediatrician... We’ve actually sat down with him...talked through what’s best and what to do next.” Principal*

*“Yes, a culture change and at different schools you’ll get that cultural change at different levels...when whole schools take on a communication approach... [I] help people realise that just because they can’t talk doesn’t mean they’ve got nothing to say. There’s no relationship between intellectual function.” Speech Pathologist*



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<sup>1</sup>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 4 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/>).