

IMPROVING SCHOOL- BASED SUPPORT SERVICES FOR STUDENTS WITH ADHD

Submission to the Inquiry into assessment and support services for people with ADHD, conducted by the Senate Community Affairs References Committee.

Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) is the peak body and leading advocate representing school-aged students in Victoria. We were created by students to be a voice for all primary and secondary school students at the highest levels of decision making in Victorian education. Our vision is an education system that is student-led, student driven and student-focused.

The findings in this report were gathered in consultation with Victorian students with ADHD, and the recommendations were developed as a result of these consultations. VicSRC is thankful for the support and expertise of everyone who contributed to this work.



VicSRC respectfully acknowledges and recognises the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the custodians of this land. We pay our respects to the ancestors and Elders past and present of all Aboriginal nations in Victoria and across the wider continent.

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Introduction

Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Federal Inquiry into assessment and support services for people with ADHD.

As the peak body for primary and secondary school-aged students in Victoria, VicSRC exists to advocate for the interests of all Victorian students. VicSRC believes all students deserve the opportunity to engage in education that is meaningful, flexible and relevant to their needs. We recognise the importance of an education system that is tailored to the needs of students, embedding student voice at every level of decision-making to ensure the best possible outcome for students and the broader community.

This report, formulated in consultation with Victorian students with ADHD, identifies elements of their education experience which stand in the way of their full and equal participation in education. Students cited a lack of support, improper support, and confusion about support that was available to them as some of the driving factors which contributed to this sense of disengagement.

This report also found that students with ADHD often feel ostracised by the support they received, and in some cases encountered difficulties when trying to access accommodations to support their learning because of misconceptions about fairness and the necessity for such accommodations. Students cited classroom support delivered by teachers as one of the most important, and variable, elements of their education experience as a student with ADHD, and overwhelmingly conveyed the need for additional education and support for teachers to assist students with ADHD in more effective and needs-sensitive ways.

This report includes a series of recommendations relating to support services available to students with ADHD which VicSRC believes will make a meaningful and lasting difference to their education experience, and their lives after they leave school.

Summary of Recommendations

1. The Australian Government should prioritise the delivery of professional development for all teachers and school staff to ensure they possess a strong and contemporary understanding of the diverse learning needs of students with ADHD and are well-placed to make appropriate accommodations in the classroom for those students whenever necessary.
2. The Australian Government, in conjunction with states and territories, should work to improve the student-to-support worker ratio by establishing a national standard benchmark, and expanding the delivery of existing schemes designed to support the employment of school-based support workers to reach every school.
3. All schools must provide timely and accessible information to all students about the kinds of additional support available to them and make clear the pathways which exist for students to gain access to that support.
4. The Federal Government should invest in new research to understand more deeply, and work to correct, unhelpful social attitudes related to school-based support services to remove barriers for students who are actively receiving or considering engaging with that support.
5. State and territory governments should engage in the student-led design and implementation of new primary school education resources specifically tailored to normalising neurodiversity and the need for some students to receive additional support in school settings to address persistent stigma surrounding the issue.
6. Schools must work with teachers to ensure they are aware of proper referral pathways available both within school settings and outside of school to ensure that students receive advice about ADHD and neurodiversity in appropriate ways.

BACKGROUND

What is ADHD?

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is defined as a developmental disorder that begins in early childhood and which impacts the brain's ability to regulate its 'executive functioning'. This refers to the ability to self-regulate and control thoughts, words, actions and emotions¹.

ADHD presents itself through a series of symptoms which are typically classified in two main ways: inattentive symptoms, and hyperactive-impulsive symptoms. Some people may experience a combination of symptoms, while others may experience more of one type of symptom than the other. Some of the most common symptoms of ADHD include being easily distracted, difficulties with completing tasks or staying focused, difficulty with organisation, difficulty remembering things, finding boredom intolerable, fidgeting, and impulsive behaviour without consideration of consequences².

ADHD begins in early childhood, and as such childhood diagnoses are common. Nonetheless, adults can also be diagnosed with ADHD. Around 3 in 4 adults who have ADHD will see their symptoms persist into adulthood³.

How does ADHD impact students?

Given the symptomatic nature of ADHD, it is possible to draw immediate assumptions about the potential impacts for students living and learning with the condition as they navigate their education experience while learning to manage their symptoms at the same time. Indeed, existing academic research in this field illustrates a strong consensus among experts that ADHD can present major challenges to students during their time at school.

One prominent 2021 study of Australian students measured the academic outcomes of 327 students with ADHD as compared to 3,916 of their peers without ADHD. The findings of this research concluded that students with ADHD "[had] substantially lower achievement in reading, writing, and numeracy"⁴, and that "Children and adolescents with ADHD need substantial support to manage inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity" to manage their experiences at school and maintain a standard level of academic achievement. The report also noted that "skilled remediation in literacy and numeracy is required throughout all school years"⁵, thus reiterating the essential need for appropriate school-based support for students with ADHD to ensure they can reach their full potential throughout their education.

Experts agree, however, that ADHD does not impose any substantive impact on a person's intelligence, with one major 2012 study finding that the prevalence of ADHD is roughly equal among people of low, medium and high IQ brackets alike⁶, suggesting that any impact of the intelligence of a

¹ Healthdirect (Australian Government) n.d., 'Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)', *Healthdirect.gov.au*, accessed 13 June 2023 ([link](#)).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Lawrence, D., Houghton, S., Dawson, V., Sawyer, M. and Carroll, A. (2021), 'Trajectories of academic achievement for students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder', *British Journal of Education Psychology*, 91, pp. 755-774 ([link](#)).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Katusic, M. Z., Voigt, R. G., Colligan, R. C., Weaver, A. L., Homan, K. J., Barbaresi, W. J. (2012), 'Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder in children with high intelligence quotient: results from a population-based study', *Journal of Developmental Behavioural Podiatry*, 32(2), pp. 103-1099 ([link](#)).

student with ADHD cannot necessarily stand as an adequate explanation for adverse performance at school.

Meanwhile, a comparable and prominent study of 3,915 secondary school-aged students in the United States found that the impacts of ADHD extended beyond mere academic performance, into other aspects of a students' social experiences at school, finding that "ADHD explained significant variance in numerous [school-based] adversities" including schoolwork noncompletion, school suspension, school expulsion, changing schools, and repeating year levels⁷. Broader research widely indicates that people with ADHD often struggle with developing and maintain relationships, and with navigating social interactions⁸, including in the school setting.

Existing research therefore indicates a strong correlation between ADHD and negative outcomes at school, both academically and socially, while also reiterating no link between ADHD and impaired intelligence. As such, it follows that what stands in the way of students with ADHD achieving their full potential at school are the barriers presented to those students in the context of their education, rather than their ability to achieve that education inherently.

What does 'helpful assistance' look like at school for students with ADHD?

A strong, but still developing, evidence-base has emerged to provide clear and effective strategies to support the outcomes of students with ADHD⁹ both in the classroom and at school generally. These proven strategies include making simple alterations to classroom instruction to better accommodate the learning styles of students with ADHD, like simplifying instructions, varying teaching strategies (ie. avoiding extended instruction of any one kind), minimising distractions and providing students with dedicated time to practice and revise, among other strategies¹⁰. Indeed, this report found that in many cases, according to students consulted, their own desires for additional support displayed a high level of correlation with this existing evidence-base of strategies.

This suggests that more in-service learning for educators may be beneficial to students with ADHD. Indeed, this kind of professional development for teachers proves to be an essential component in improving outcomes in the classroom for students with ADHD. One 2007 study of 49 educators and 149 of their students measured teachers' confidence in teaching students with ADHD and providing accommodations to those students. That research found that all types of professional development programs under consideration (including workshops, lectures, self-guided manuals and reporting systems) improved teachers' confidence in working with students with ADHD¹¹ as well as improved teachers' self-reported ability to make effective accommodations for students with ADHD in their classrooms¹².

Research also suggests that broader behavioural and self-management interventions delivered to students with ADHD outside of the classroom, namely by youth social workers, welfare officers or health practitioners including psychologists, also prove to be valuable in building up students'

⁷ Martin, A. J. (2014), 'The role of ADHD in academic adversity: Disentangling ADHD effects from other personal and contextual factors', *School Psychology Quarterly*, 29(4), pp. 395–408.

⁸ De Boo G, M., Prins, P. J. (2007), 'Social incompetence in children with ADHD: Possible moderators and mediators in social-skills training', *Clinical Psychology Review*, 27(1), pp. 78-97.

⁹ New South Wales Department of Education n.d., 'Evidence-based strategies for ADHD', *Education.nsw.gov.au*, accessed 19 June 2023 ([link](#)).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Zentall, S. S., & Javorsky, J. (2007), 'Professional Development for Teachers of Students With ADHD and Characteristics of ADHD', *Behavioral Disorders*, 32 (2), pp. 78–93.

¹² Ibid., p. 90.

skillsets in managing their obligations and developing strategies to thrive at school¹³. These additional support networks in schools also prove to be a helpful resource to co-ordinate effective strategies for students between teachers, and to assist in teachers' own understanding what effective strategies may look like¹⁴.

The prevalence of ADHD in Victorian students

It is estimated that around one in 20 Australian children have ADHD¹⁵. Moreover, the Murdoch Children's Research Institute estimates that 6-7% of the students entering secondary education in Australia each year will have ADHD¹⁶. According to these figures, the number of Australian primary and secondary students with ADHD in 2022¹⁷ would thus amount to some 220,000 students.

When considering the national average class size in Australia of 23 students per class¹⁸, at least one student in every classroom, on average, will have ADHD.

These figures demonstrate that the domain for school-based support for students with ADHD is wide, and that all schools must be adequately prepared to cater for students with ADHD if they are to ensure that all of their students are best-placed to achieve their full potential.

METHODOLOGY

This report is supported by the findings of consultations undertaken by VicSRC which engaged with 15 secondary-school aged Victorian students from across metropolitan Melbourne. The objective of these consultations was to more deeply understand the qualitative nature of their experiences at school with ADHD and identify correlating reflections from students based upon the existing evidence base.

93% of students consulted attended government schools, with the remainder attending independent schools. 93% has received a formal ADHD diagnosis, with the remainder identifying that they believed they were living with ADHD but were not seeking a formal diagnosis at the time of the consultation. Students from all secondary year levels were invited to participate, and the year-level breakdown of students engaged through this process is as follows:

Year Level	Number of students
Year 7	1
Year 8	2
Year 9	4
Year 10	4
Year 11	2
Year 12	2

¹³ Wiener, J. (2020), 'The Role of School Psychologists in Supporting Adolescents With ADHD', *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*, 35(4), pp. 299–310.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Royal Childrens Hospital Melbourne n.d., 'Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)', *Rch.org.au*, accessed 14 June 2023 ([link](#)).

¹⁶ Murdoch Children's Research Institute 2017, 'Students with ADHD failing to meet minimum education standards', *Mcri.edu.au*, 16 June 2017, accessed 14 June 2023 ([link](#)).

¹⁷ Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority 2022, 'Student numbers', *acara.edu.au*, accessed 14 June 2023 ([link](#)).

¹⁸ Australian Association for Research in Education 2019, '2019 Report Card for Australia's national efforts in education', *Aare.edu.au*, 16 December 2019, accessed 14 June 2023 ([link](#)).

VicSRC conducted four online consultation sessions and invited students to participate in small group discussions to reflect on their experiences at school. Students were provided with a series of discussion questions in three key areas:

1. Your experience at school with ADHD
2. Your experiences with school-based support services
3. Additional support you may need to succeed at school.

These reflections were collected and processed by VicSRC using thematic analysis to identify key recurring themes. Key reflections from students have been represented in this report in an anonymised fashion. VicSRC conducted a vetting process to ensure that all participants were genuine Victorian students. VicSRC closely monitored engagement with students at every level to maintain a high standard of child safety. Participants were reimbursed for their time.

IDENTIFYING AND ADDRESSING BARRIERS AT SCHOOL FOR STUDENTS WITH ADHD

Students with ADHD face challenges with many fundamental aspects of classroom learning.

Students consulted as part of this research were asked to reflect on how their experiences in the classroom differed from that of their peers who did not have ADHD. This was to assess the correlation between the experiences of those students with the existing body of research in this field which consistently indicates that students with ADHD exhibit a number of behaviours that negatively impact their experience, and performance, in the classroom¹⁹. Some of those behaviours include problems with sustaining concentration on teacher instruction and during independent 'seat-work', difficulties with organising class materials, completing classwork or homework in a timely fashion, and behaving disruptively in the classroom without consideration of consequences²⁰.

VicSRC's consultations found that Victorian students with ADHD encountered all of these issues in their own classrooms. Half of students consulted reflected that they felt the classroom was, for these reasons, sometimes not an effective place for them to learn.

Among the challenges faced in the classroom by students consulted, the most often cited were extended periods of instruction involving notation and the consolidation of high levels of information. This is unsurprising considering that existing research in this area consistently refers to challenges in maintaining concentration for extended periods in the classroom as representing a central challenge for students with ADHD²¹.

This proved to be an exhausting exercise for students consulted who struggled to maintain a high level of concentration on the subject matter while being asked to notate simultaneously. This in turn led to knowledge gaps for those students and extended the time commitment of various classroom-based activities because of the need to revisit materials multiple times.

¹⁹ DuPaul, G. J, Jimerson, S. R. (2014), 'Assessing, Understanding, and Supporting Students With ADHD at School: Contemporary Science, Practice, and Policy', *School Psychology Quarterly*, 29(4), pp. 379-380.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 380.

²¹ Litner, B. (2003), 'Teens with ADHD: The challenge of high school', *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 32(3), p. 139.

I spend a lot of time reading or watching materials multiple times. There's never enough time and I end up falling behind. – Year 11 student.

This process, according to students, sometimes forced them into deferring their work to time spent outside of the classroom, including at home, which led them to report feeling overwhelmed by their obligations. This fostered feelings of resentment and frustration with school and their workload. Students reflected that when these feelings persisted, or in circumstances where multiple classes presented similar issues at the same, it had a compounding negative effect on their mindset and productivity.

Several students also reported that learning materials and modes of teacher delivery in the classroom were often not suited to their own style of learning, which had an additional impact on students who felt the need to spend extra time consuming and understanding relevant materials before moving on to other tasks.

Examination settings also present challenges for students with ADHD, though effective solutions remain elusive.

In related reflections, students also cited common challenges in examination settings which stood in the way of them reaching their full academic potential. Students most referred to the high tendency for distraction in these settings, and stringent time constraints which contributed to their sub-optimum performance in examinations. Most students felt that remedies to these problems were usually not complex, like providing them with more time to complete the exam, being placed in a separate, smaller room, or wearing headphones to minimise distractions.

I really struggle with exams. Everyone in one big room is very distracting. I focus on everything else, including how much work they're doing, rather than my own work. – Year 11 student.

In fact, research in this area remains indefinite, with two major studies finding no substantive correlation between separate-room accommodations with improvements in academic performance²², while another concluded that it is 'too simplistic' to suggest that students with ADHD would benefit from separate-room testing inherently²³. Regarding the provision of additional time for students with ADHD to complete their examinations, two studies found that doing so did not have a positive impact on the students' overall performance²⁴.

Students felt that some teachers were not equipped to provide effective for them in the classroom.

The majority of student feedback relating to their teachers was positive in nature, with students regularly reflecting that their teachers were well-intentioned and usually made a conscious effort to support them with their work whenever possible.

However, six students reported that despite their good intentions, the forms of support offered to them was not always effective and did not always reflect what was needed in those circumstances.

²² Lovett, B. J., Lewandowski, L. J., Carter, L. (2019), 'Separate Room Testing Accommodations for Students With and Without ADHD', *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, 1(11), p. 7.

²³ Lovett, B. J., Lewandowski, L. J. (2020), 'Private Room Testing Accommodations for Students with ADHD', *The ADHD Report* 28(8), p. 5.

²⁴ Lee, K. S., Osborne, R. E., Hayes, K. A., & Simoes, R. A. (2008). 'The Effects of Pacing on the Academic Testing Performance of College Students with ADHD: A Mixed Methods Study', *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, 39(2), pp. 123–141.

A lot of my teachers seem to have a good understanding of ADHD. Most of them have good intentions and try to understand and help, but it doesn't always work. – Year 10 student.

Some students also reported that their experiences in the classroom varied greatly depending on the individual teacher, with four students reporting that they simultaneously received excellent support from some teachers while other teachers failed to provide even basic accommodations for them to assist with their schoolwork.

The effect was an imbalanced and uneven support network available to them at school, which in turn led some students to develop strong preferences for the subjects they attend and engage with, and drove disengagement with others.

It varies a lot depending on the teacher. My English teacher lets me use my headphones and work independently, but my science teacher told me I didn't have ADHD, and that I was just lazy. – Year 10 student.

These reflections correlate to existing research, with a major study of Australian teachers from ADHD Australia identifying the 'inconsistency of strategies across teachers to support students with ADHD' as the leading barrier to achieving the best educational outcomes for students with ADHD²⁵.

Students noted that there were some basic strategies teachers could employ to make their learning experiences easier and more effective in the classroom, like providing simplified instructions and more clearly outlining deliverables associated with each task, which correlate strongly with the existing evidence-base of effective support strategies for students with ADHD²⁶. Nonetheless, students consulted were not always receiving these simple accommodations.

A lot of the time, all I need is clearer and more simple instructions. – Year 12 student.

A majority of students consulted agreed that having the opportunity to spend more time with teachers one-on-one was often a major driving factor in their classroom success. This, according to one Victorian student, provided them with opportunities to ask questions directly and re-organise their own understanding of classroom work in a way which made sense to them.

These reflections also support existing findings which indicate that students with ADHD can greatly benefit from individualised support from teachers in classroom settings²⁷.

Altogether, these reflections seem to indicate that some basic changes to classroom instruction and delivery were easily within reach when teachers were properly equipped with the knowledge and skills to implement those improvements, but that these accommodations were delivered in an uneven way across a student's entire education experience.

Some students with ADHD feel misunderstood and misinterpreted by teachers and school staff.

Throughout the consultations, students regularly cited feeling misunderstood by their teachers, and that their behaviour or attitudes in class were often misinterpreted as acts of rebellion or misbehaviour. In fact, students reported feeling frustrated and ill-equipped to fulfill their obligations in

²⁵ ADHD Australia (2021), 'Building Brighter Pathways : ADHD Australia Education Survey Report', *Adhdaustralia.org.au*, 28 September 2021, accessed 19 June 2023 ([link](#)).

²⁶ New South Wales Department of Education n.d.

²⁷ Reiber, C. & McLaughlin, T. F. (2004), 'Classroom Interventions: Methods To Improve Academic Performance And Classroom Behaviour For Students With Attention-deficit/hyperactivity Disorder', *International Journal of Special Education*, 19(1), p. 9.

the classroom with the resources and support they had available to them. According to three students, these continued misunderstandings resulted in a gradual deterioration of their teacher-student working relationships.

I get frustrated by my teachers because if I'm not paying attention they have no strategy to keep me engaged except nagging me, which makes me frustrated and doesn't help me pay attention. Teachers who can motivate me are more helpful. – Year 9 student.

Two students also reported situations where teachers would accuse them of being lazy or unmotivated when in fact they felt they were struggling to complete their tasks satisfactorily within contexts not suited to students with ADHD.

Even after I got my diagnosis, my maths teacher told me I didn't have ADHD, and that I was just lazy. I didn't feel supported by them at all. – Year 10 student.

Five students reported positive experiences with their teachers in circumstances where the teacher in question had a personal connection with ADHD. Students reported that teachers who had family members or friends with ADHD had a better understanding of the students' needs and were better equipped to provide assistance in classroom settings which students considered helpful and effective.

Students noted that teachers' attitudes and skills catering to students with ADHD seemed to be changing rapidly, with many students reflecting on changes they had noticed themselves as they progressed through their own schooling. Sixty percent of students agreed that teachers who only recently started in the profession were generally more understanding and better equipped to make accommodations for students with ADHD.

ADHD is becoming more and more understood. Younger teachers seem more aware about new information on ADHD. – Year 11 student.

Existing research in this area indicates that while Australian teachers feel generally better equipped to effectively support students with ADHD than in the past, there is still a large appetite for additional professional development among teachers. ADHD Australia reported that 87% of teachers surveyed felt that their pre-service training did not adequately prepare them to support students with ADHD²⁸, while 93% of teachers surveyed felt they would benefit from additional professional development²⁹.

These findings altogether seem to suggest that ongoing improvements to education and training for teachers when it comes to the diverse learning needs of some students continues to yield positive results in relation to students' experiences and outcomes in the classroom. However, a strong appetite for additional education among teachers, as well as student reports that there is a gulf in understanding amongst some teachers about implementing effective strategies for students with ADHD, means that more must be done at both the pre-service and in-service levels to ensure that all teachers are well-equipped to deliver appropriate accommodations to, and otherwise support, students with ADHD.

Recommendation: The Australian Government should prioritise the delivery of professional development for all teachers and school staff to ensure they possess a strong and contemporary understanding of the diverse learning needs of students with ADHD, and are well-placed to make appropriate accommodations in the classroom for those students whenever necessary.

²⁸ ADHD Australia (2021), p. 9.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

Students with ADHD often feel disadvantaged socially, as well as academically.

The challenges faced by students with ADHD described thus far altogether put an elevated level of pressure on them to perform and integrate at school. Students reported often feeling like they were not equipped to deal with these pressures, which led to further stress and anxiety, along with falling behind with their schoolwork.

I'm doing my best to do well at school but seeing my friends do well so easily makes me feel like crap. – Year 9 student.

This would, in some cases, go on to impact their social life, and life outside of school more generally.

Sometimes I'm too stressed with school to enjoy my time off with friends. – Year 10 student.

Existing research which explores strategies to improve outcomes for students with ADHD at school, however, tends to focus primarily on measures to improve academic performance. This approach fails to build a holistic understanding of the broader social implications of ADHD on a student's life and experience at school. This indicates the need for further research in this area in order to develop an academic research-based to inform school-based strategies to assist students with ADHD in achieving and maintaining positive social outcomes, as well as academic outcomes, while at school.

Overall, the emergent narrative from students with ADHD consulted is one of students who overwhelmingly are interested and invested in making their experience at school a success, but who are often faced with persistent multi-faceted barriers at school which stand in the way of them reaching their full potential.

IMPROVING SCHOOL-BASED SUPPORT SERVICES FOR STUDENTS WITH ADHD

The findings of this report have thus far reiterated the widely-accepted notion that students with ADHD require additional support from their school in order to achieve their goals, both in classroom settings and as part of their broader school experience. But support for students with ADHD as delivered by their teachers comprises merely one aspect of a student's broader support network at school. Designed to complement in-classroom strategies, school-based support services exist to provide students with diverse needs, including students with ADHD, with additional and tailored support in an effort to ensure that each student is well-placed to success to the best of their capabilities.

As such, a major focus of VicSRC's consultations with students was to assess the effectiveness and availability of those support services to understand what support is most helpful to students, and the challenges those students face in accessing and dealing with the support services available to them.

In assessing the current state of school-based support services available to Australian students, there are a few key mechanisms which exist to support the provision of such support, administered by both federal and state governments, and by external providers.

The National Student Wellbeing Program, funded by the Federal Government and administered by states and territories, provides limited funding for participating schools to engage a chaplain or wellbeing officer to support students at school. Participation in the scheme is voluntary, and is

capped on a per-state basis³⁰. The scheme does not provide sufficient funding to employ a wellbeing officer in every school³¹.

In Victoria, The School Support Services policy provides a means for schools to access additional professional support from psychologists, speech pathologists and social workers through a referral pathway initiated at the school-level³². These support teams work with schools to identify appropriate means of support in response to the needs of individual students, and support the professional capabilities of schools to deliver that support³³. Other states take comparable but largely varied approaches to delivering school-based support for students.

Additional pathways exist for some students to access individualised funding support, through mechanisms like the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) or state-based schemes including the Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD) in Victoria, however a diagnosis of ADHD alone does not represent a sufficient benchmark for inclusion into these schemes³⁴. Only 13% of students consulted were accessing additional funding support for their needs.

The level of school-based support students currently receive varies greatly.

The end result of this varied landscape is an uneven distribution of school-based support services for students with ADHD. Resources available to students at school depends highly on the level of additional support which an individual school is able to access, and the degree to which they prioritise the establishment of a student wellbeing team at the school.

Unsurprisingly, VicSRC's consultations with students revealed highly varied experiences with school-based support services. While some students reported positive experiences, feeling like they were adequately supported and could access the accommodations they needed, many students reported feeling like the level of support that was available was inadequate, or that they were unaware of any kinds of support available at school.

One of the most common reflections from students was that support services offered by schools were not adequately resourced to provide an appropriate level of support for all of the students who required it, and that they could not access that support as frequently as they felt was necessary.

There's only one support person at my school. The problem is that the school doesn't have the resources to help every student, so I couldn't get more help even if I wanted it. – Year 12 student.

Students also recalled some circumstances in which schools were made aware of their diagnosis and their need for additional support, but that support was not forthcoming, including circumstances where students notified their school of their ADHD but no proactive measures were taken, or when students identified a need for accommodations with their teachers but they were not provided.

³⁰ Victorian Government 2023, 'National Student Wellbeing Program', *Vic.gov.au*, accessed 19 June 2023 ([link](#)).

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Victorian Department of Education, 'Student Support Services: Policy', *Education.vic.gov.au*, access 19 June 2023 ([link](#)).

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Whitehouse, A 2022, 'Should ADHD be in the NDIS? Yes, but eligibility for disability supports should depend on the person not their diagnosis', *The Conversation*, 29 September 2022, accessed 22 June 2023 ([link](#)).

I talked to my school about my ADHD but nothing came of it. They know I have ADHD but no support has been provided. – Year 9 student.

In circumstances where students were able to access a level of support which they felt was appropriate and could deliver stronger outcomes for them, they reported positive outcomes including learning new methods of managing their workload and maintaining a positive mindset in the face of challenges in the classroom.

Moreover, these positive outcomes were not exclusive to situations involving teacher's aides or other bespoke support – students also reported very positive experiences with their school's wellbeing officers and other relevant members of a school's wellbeing team. Student wellbeing officers, according to students, were also able to coordinate with students' teachers to ensure they were aware of appropriate accommodations which should be made to them if required.

Our school has a wellbeing person who is amazing. She is very helpful. – Year 10 student.

Students consulted who were enrolled in alternative schools with an overt focus on catering to students with diverse needs also reported a high-level of positive feedback, especially in school settings where qualified youth workers supported students and teachers alike. These reflections are reinforced by existing research in the area with one study from Victoria University finding that having a youth worker present in classroom settings has a positive impact both on academic outcomes for students and for their general behaviour and mindset within the classroom³⁵.

Based on these reflections from students, it seems that the support network available to them at school is uneven and varies greatly depending on their individual school. This combined with the aforementioned limited nature of available resourcing for schools to employ support workers, makes it unsurprising that students report varied and uneven experiences in this regard. With these findings in mind, it is clear that every school must be provided with the resources to employ the professional support staff required to deliver this much-needed additional support to students.

Recommendation: The Australian Government, in conjunction with states and territories, should work to improve the student-to-support worker ratio by establishing a national standard benchmark, and expanding the delivery of existing schemes designed to support the employment of school-based support workers to reach every school.

School-based support often relies on students reaching out for that support, which is something many students do not feel equipped to do.

Six students reflected on circumstances in which teachers and school staff would advise them to reach out for help if they felt they needed support. However, students explained that they often felt un-equipped to understand or convey the nature of the support they needed, and were not aware of the kinds of support that were available to them. This left some students disempowered to reach out for help.

I struggle asking for help. I won't always take the opportunity to ask for help. Some of my teachers know I need help and offer, but most don't. – Year 11 student.

Based on these reflections, it is clear that some schools are not providing students with proactive support (or guidance to access that support) in circumstances where additional support was likely needed. This may be reflective of associated findings in this report that some schools are less-

³⁵ Melbourne City Mission (2019), 'The Hester Hornbrook Academy Classroom Youth Worker Research : Final Report', *Mcm.org.au*, accessed 20 June 2023 ([link](#)).

equipped than others to provide support services to students when required, or that the limited nature of available resources prevent some schools from acting proactively in this regard. The root causes of these problems remain unclear, which indicates the need for more research to better understand the gulf which currently exists between the overall demand for school-based support services and the current level of service which is available and provided.

Ultimately, however, it remains critically important to ensure that students are provided with opportunities to access support when it is required. Schools are legally obligated to assist students in this regard³⁶. In order to fulfil these obligations, schools should make a proactive effort to ensure that students are aware of the support pathways available to them, and the steps they can take to access those services or identify appropriate staff members who can assist those students in doing so.

Recommendation: All schools must provide timely and accessible information to all students about the kinds of additional support available to them and make clear the pathways which exist for students to gain access to that support.

Students with ADHD feel ostracised and 'othered' by current forms of school-based support.

When discussing all forms of school-based support services available to students to help them manage their school experience with ADHD, students often cited negative feelings associated with receiving that support because of common negative connotations perpetuated by their peers.

These negative connotations proved to be a complex and difficult problem for students who explained that in some circumstances, the exact nature of the support they received was less relevant, and the mere fact that they required additional support from their school strained their social connections and thus presented a barrier to their full engagement at school.

As soon as you get support you're 'different' and that can really get in the way of my social life. – Year 9 student.

Unfortunately, in some cases this strain extended into bullying and severe social isolation, with some students reflecting that their peers would mistreat them as a result of support received at school.

I am seen as a helpless kid that can be bullied because I need help from an adult. – Year 9 student.

This also proved to be a disincentive for students who were considering engaging with support services in the first instance, with students explaining that they did not want to be perceived as someone who needed any extra help to be successful at school.

I don't want to feel different to other students so I'm not sure if I want any of the support available. – Year 10 student.

Some students with ADHD have internalised guilt about receiving accommodations for their work.

Three students also reported feeling that simple accommodations like additional time to complete their schoolwork and examinations, or wearing headphones in some settings to reduce distractions would be perceived as an unfair advantage compared to their peers, despite acknowledging that the

³⁶ Australian Government (Department of Education) n.d, 'Disability Standards for Education 2005', Education.gov.au, accessed 22 June 2023 ([link](#)).

additional time would merely provide an opportunity for them to perform at the same level as their peers, rather than excel unfairly.

I'd like more support but I don't want to feel like I'm different or I'm cheating, like if I wear headphones or have extra time for an exam. – Year 10 student.

This problem also emerged during conversations with students about how they receive support from their teachers in the classroom. One student recognised that their teachers would typically spend additional time with them in order to ensure that the work was understood, and the student was accommodated. In so doing, however, the student felt they were 'denying' other students an opportunity to speak directly with the teacher in the limited available class-time.

The ostracising nature of school-based support refers to a challenge which is underrepresented by existing academic research. The findings of this report nonetheless indicate that these problems stand as major barrier for students with ADHD when considering whether to engage with additional support they may need, and as a persistent problem for some students as they continue to engage with that support. More work must be done to assess the factors which contribute to the establishment and persistence of negative stereotypes associated with students receiving additional support in schools, as well as to develop improved and evidence-based strategies to address these negative connotations.

Recommendation: The Federal Government should invest in new research to understand more deeply, and work to correct, unhelpful social attitudes related to school-based support services to remove barriers for students who are actively receiving or considering engaging with that support.

Students felt that more education about diverse learning needs must happen during primary school.

In discussing students' attitudes which may explain the aforementioned stigma associated with receiving additional support in school, three students cited a lack of social education and awareness of ADHD and neurodiversity throughout their time in primary school as a potential contributing factor. Those students explained that if their schools took a more open approach to discussing the diverse needs of students, including receiving additional support, that this would have helped to normalise those needs for students with ADHD.

It would be really helpful if we talked about [receiving] support more in primary school so it seems more normal by the time we get to high school. – Year 9 student.

Student reflections on this subject also indicated that primary school teachers, like their secondary school counterparts, were in some cases not equipped to properly identify the signs of ADHD in their students and sometimes mischaracterised these signs as 'problem behaviour' or rebellion.

Primary school was really hard. Teachers called me lazy or naughty, but I was just struggling. – Year 8 student.

Indeed, a 2021 study from ADHD Australia indicated that the instances of available resources and learning supports for both teachers and students was, according to teachers, lower across the board in primary schools as compared to secondary schools³⁷.

These problems, combined with students' negative experiences with peers when receiving support, speaks to an overarching stigmatisation of ADHD and neurodiversity, and reflects an urgent need for

³⁷ ADHD Australia 2021, p. 7.

additional early intervention with students and teachers alike which focuses on normalising the need for some students to receive additional and diverse forms of support while at school.

Recommendation: State and territory governments should engage in the student-led design and implementation of new primary school education resources specifically tailored to normalising neurodiversity and the need for some students to receive additional support in school settings to address persistent stigma surrounding the issue.

Many students cite their experience at school as the first time they suspect they have ADHD, but the advice they receive from their schools varies.

Students were asked to what degree their schools were involved in helping them to identify their ADHD and provide referral pathways towards more formal support and an ultimate diagnosis. Students reflected on widely varied experiences with school-based referral pathways which relied heavily on proactive teachers who knew how to recognise the symptoms and make contact with students' parents.

My year 7 science teacher noticed that I wasn't paying attention and told me to talk to my doctor which led to my diagnosis. – Year 10 student.

However, students' reflections also indicated that teachers, while helpful, could sometimes only provide informal advice or information to students and parents about potential explanations for the behaviours or symptoms they had noticed. Dedicated support personnel within schools, however, were better placed to provide more specific and actionable advice, according to students.

The wellbeing team at my school was really helpful to me and my parents in helping to get my diagnosis. – Year 9 student.

Given that around half of students consulted agreed that a teacher was among the first people to raise questions about symptoms of ADHD with them or their parents, it is clearly important that teachers are well-equipped to provide clear and effective advice to students which directs them to health practitioners, either within the school setting (ie. a psychologist or welfare officer) or externally (ie. a general practitioner) to properly investigate these questions when they arise.

Not only does this reiterate this report's existing recommendation to further support professional learning for teachers in this area, but also presents a separate need to ensure that teachers are properly informed about what appropriate referral advice looks like, and ensure they are equipped to provide that advice to students in a consistent fashion.

Recommendation: Schools must work with teachers to ensure they are aware of proper referral pathways available both within school settings (ie. to a staff social worker, psychologist or wellbeing officer) and outside of school (ie. a general practitioner) to ensure that students receive advice about ADHD and neurodiversity in appropriate ways.