

Supporting neurodivergent students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SLD)

How parents can assess whether a school's support is effective

If you have an urgent concern about your child's learning or wellbeing, please contact your school or relevant professionals promptly.

Why this matters

Students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SLD), including dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia, often appear capable but cannot access learning without explicit instruction and reasonable adjustments. Schools may describe themselves as “inclusive”, but these claims only matter if they are reflected in classroom practice, planning, and accountability.

Reasonable adjustments should be implemented as soon as a need is identified. They should not be delayed while a school waits for diagnosis, funding decisions, or further evidence. This expectation is reflected in the Victorian Department of Education's Inclusive Education Policy:

<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/inclusive-education-policy/policy>

This fact sheet supports parents in looking beneath surface language and assessing whether a school's systems and practices are actually meeting their child's needs.

Understanding SLD and neurodiversity

Schools should recognise that persistent difficulties in literacy and numeracy reflect barriers to learning, not student attitude or effort.

When ongoing difficulties in reading, spelling, writing, or mathematics are attributed to motivation, behaviour, confidence, or “*not trying hard enough*”, this typically signals gaps in instructional understanding or provision rather than a lack of capacity in the child.

Effective policy and practice require schools to identify the functional learning barriers that are preventing progress and to respond with explicit, systematic teaching and appropriate adjustments. The central question is not *why isn't this child trying*, but *what is getting in the way of learning, and how must instruction change to remove that barrier?*

This approach ensures that support is timely, evidence-based, and responsive to need, regardless of whether a child has a formal diagnosis, meets funding criteria, or presents with visible difficulty.

Parents can ask:

- How does the school define and recognise Specific Learning Difficulties?
- How do staff distinguish SLD from lack of effort or confidence?
- How is this understanding reflected in classroom teaching?

Teacher knowledge and training

Students with SLD require teachers who are trained in evidence-based instruction, not just general disability awareness. Leadership is responsible for ensuring that professional learning is reflected in classroom practice.

Relevant Department guidance:

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/diversity/Pages/capability.aspx>

Parents can ask:

- What specific training have teachers completed to support students with SLD?
- When did this training occur?
- How does leadership check that this training is reflected in classroom practice?

Teaching approaches and curriculum access

For literacy, effective instruction includes explicit teaching, systematic sequencing, phonemic awareness, phonics, word structure, and sentence-level and vocabulary instruction. Approaches that rely on exposure, guessing strategies, or unsystematic phonics increase cognitive load and are not supported by evidence for students with SLD.

The Victorian Department of Education requires government primary and specialist schools to implement structured literacy approaches:

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/Pages/structured-literacy.aspx>

Additional support should not replace access to effective Tier 1 (whole-class) instruction. Withdrawal or intervention should supplement, not substitute, high-quality classroom teaching. This aligns with the Department's Multi-Tiered System of Supports framework:

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/diversity/Pages/mtss.aspx>

Parents can ask:

- How are reading and spelling taught in classrooms?
- Is phonics taught explicitly and systematically?
- How are struggling students supported during whole-class instruction?
- Does additional support replace or supplement classroom teaching?

Identifying students who need support

Effective schools have clear, documented processes for identifying students who may be struggling and responding early.

Department guidance on early identification:

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/diversity/Pages/earlyintervention.aspx>

Parents can ask:

- How are learning difficulties identified?
- Who can raise concerns and how?
- How and when are families informed?
- What happens if concerns persist despite classroom support?

Individual Education Plans (IEPs)

Students with SLD may require an Individual Education Plan to ensure support is planned, documented, and consistently implemented.

Department guidance on IEPs:

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/diversity/Pages/iep.aspx>

Parents can ask:

- How does the school decide whether a student needs an IEP?
- Is SLD recognised as a valid reason for an IEP?
- How often are IEPs reviewed and updated?

Communication across staff, especially in secondary school

In secondary settings, support often breaks down due to poor communication between staff. All subjects place reading, writing, and organisational demands on students.

Student Support Groups are intended to support shared responsibility and communication:

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/parents/needs/Pages/supportgroups.aspx>

Parents can ask:

- How are IEPs and agreed adjustments communicated to all teachers?
- Who is responsible for ensuring this happens?
- How is consistency across subjects monitored?
- How are new, relief, or casual teachers informed?

Responsibility for adjustments must be shared across the school, not carried by a single teacher.

What to look for in an IEP

High-quality IEPs include clear, measurable goals that are reviewed regularly.

Department guidance on monitoring and review:

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/diversity/Pages/monitoring.aspx>

Parents can ask:

- Are goals specific and measurable?
- What data is used to monitor progress?
- How often is progress reviewed?
- What happens if progress stalls?

SMART goals clarify what support will be provided, how progress will be measured, and when it will be reviewed.

Inclusion and support structures

Support may include in-class adjustments, small-group teaching, or targeted intervention. What matters is coordination, documentation, and follow-through.

Parents can ask:

- Who is responsible for implementing adjustments?
- Where are adjustments documented?
- How can parents access or review this documentation?
- How does the school check whether adjustments are working?

Assistive technology

Assistive technology supports access to learning and should be used routinely where needed.

Department guidance on assistive technology:

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/diversity/Pages/assistivetech.aspx>

Parents can ask:

- What assistive technology does my child use?
- Is it available across all subjects?
- How does staff support consistent use?

Reasonable adjustments, the NCCD, and funding

Reasonable adjustments are required to remove barriers to access and participation. They are not optional and do not depend on funding.

Department guidance on reasonable adjustments:

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/diversity/Pages/reasonableadjustments.aspx>

Understanding the NCCD

The Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability:

- records the adjustments schools already provide
- is not a funding application
- does not determine whether adjustments are required

Parents can ask:

- How does the school collect NCCD data?
- Who is responsible for this process?
- What evidence is used?
- How are adjustment needs communicated to staff?

NCCD and Disability Inclusion funding are not the same

A student may require supplementary or substantial adjustments under the NCCD even if they do not receive Disability Inclusion or other targeted funding. A statement that a child “does not meet funding criteria” does not remove the school’s obligation to provide reasonable adjustments.

Parents can ask:

- What adjustments are provided regardless of funding status?
- How does the school ensure access when funding is not available?

A note for parents

You are not asking for special treatment. You are asking whether the school can meet its obligation to support your child to access learning on the same basis as their peers. If explanations remain vague, inconsistent, or focused only on funding, it is reasonable to seek clarification, review, or further advice.