

Abilities Based Learning and Education Support (ABLES)

Queensland trial, 2019–21

Case study 1: metropolitan special school

This school is located in Brisbane and has 106 enrolled students. Many of these students have multiple and complex disabilities. The school participated in the ABLES trial from its inception in 2019. The school strongly believed it needed more information about its learners, as the existing formative assessments did not provide enough in-depth information about focused learning and what the next steps were in learning progression for its students. The school found there was a significant gap in supporting those students working at levels prior to Foundation to set learning goals using the Numeracy and Literacy general capabilities.

The school uses the ABLES suite of resources across most classes in the school. The school reports that the ABLES assessments and resources are easy to use and that the platform is very user friendly. One of the strongest appeals of the ABLES assessments and resources, apart from setting goals and conducting assessment, is that the strategies were designed by Australian researchers and are evidence based within the Australian context.

At the school, 80% of students are on a highly individualised curriculum, so staff felt it was important to track communication behaviours and communication functions to gain meaningful information and set specific goals in those learning area contexts.

The school has used the ABLES assessments and resources to identify and track progress incrementally within multiple entry and exit level curriculum access points, across and within the general capabilities. Staff found that some students had individual learning goals aligned to adjusted year levels of curriculum for Prep and above but were assessed at levels prior to Foundation. The ABLES assessments and resources have been fundamental in assessing learning in addition to Literacy and Numeracy general capabilities.

Teachers have used the ABLES suite to look deeper at critical and creative thinking, and this has really helped them discover why some students are plateauing in their learning. This information was not attainable until the ABLES assessments were made available. As a result, staff have witnessed important progress for students by way of goals that targeted critical thinking. Additionally, students felt they were understood by teachers; for some, for the first time.

No other dataset has those incremental steps that ABLES has, for us, and it just lends itself to our students being successful, and us knowing our learner, which is the absolute number one.

The school has made the rollout of the ABLES assessments and resources a school-wide priority over two years. The school has progressively focused on building teacher capacity, appointing a senior teacher as lead. The professional development meets the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers through this 'hub style' tiered approach to mentoring. Teachers are instructed on how to implement the easy-to-use assessment, read through reports and set goals. A PowerPoint presentation is available for all teachers on their SharePoint for future reference. As expressed by the mentoring teacher:

I feel that ABLES is one of the only tools to inform curriculum that's specific, in Australia, to students with disabilities. We're not having to continually adjust format of assessments to try and engage the student in that assessment task. We don't have to do that with ABLES. So that's been really good.

Teachers meet with the mentoring teacher twice per term, as part of a professional learning community, to plan for the next semester's Individual Curriculum Plan (ICP) goals. Teachers have reported that this process has dramatically reduced workload, as the generated reports are easily adapted and personalised for ICP reporting. Students are working within their zone of proximal development and engaging in highly differentiated instruction, as supported by the ABLES suite.

ABLES assessments and associated reports provide a common language for both staff (teachers and teacher aides) and allied health professionals to maximise collaborative learning opportunities. The ABLES tools strengthen discussions when meeting with parents and therapists, by way of setting meaningful goals through backward mapping. Parents can also share the information with their child's private therapists, saving them a great deal of time and money.

For parents, the ABLES assessments and reports provide not only more comprehensive information about their child, but also comfort and confidence. Parents stated that the reports truly reflected their child. Teacher-parent relationships were further strengthened with a renewed, deeper understanding of the child, which is what families want.

Finally, as expressed by one senior teacher:

I think ABLES gave us a number of signposts along the way for next steps. It just changed the entire narrative around developing educational programs and plans. How do we adjust this to meet you? This is who you are. Let's begin there.

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