Augmentative and Alternative Communication in Schools Policy
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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1. Purpose ...................................................................................................................................................................................................................................3
2. Policy Statement.........................................................................................................................................................................................................3
3. Policy Requirements ...................................................................................................................................................................................................4
4. Key Information .......................................................................................................................................................................................................4
5. Roles and Responsibilities ...........................................................................................................................................................................................5
6. Related policies ............................................................................................................................................................................................................7
7. Related procedures ..................................................................................................................................................................................................7
8. Supporting information/tools ...................................................................................................................................................................................7
9. Definitions .............................................................................................................................................................................................................................8
10. Legislation ......................................................................................................................................................................................................................10
11. Supporting Information .....................................................................................................................................................................................10
12. References .........................................................................................................................................................................................................................10
1. Purpose

To be able to communicate effectively is a basic human right. It is essential to human relationships, learning, participation in life and sense of self. This policy outlines the Department of Education’s (DoE) commitment to ensuring student’s right to communicate and genuine participation within their school communities. Students with complex communication needs (CCN) have a right to a comprehensive communication system relevant to their individual requirements; to participate, access the curriculum, learn and achieve with equity.

Creating an inclusive school community where all forms of communication are valued, advocated for and practised is essential for an individual with communication difficulties to achieve. Shared beliefs about communication diversity and shared understandings about inclusive communication practices are necessary to create and sustain a learning environment where diverse communicators fulfil their potential.

This policy should be read within the context of the following:
- Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth)
- Disability Standards for Education 2005 (Cth)

2. Policy Statement

Department of Education school communities will be supported to achieve a ‘whole of school’ standard of collaboration, shared responsibilities, inclusive curriculum and continuous improvement to develop communication competencies for students using Augmented and Alternative Communication (AAC).

Focus areas for school communities supporting a student using AAC include:

2.1 Leadership and partnership (staff, family, consultants)
- Principal-led commitment and awareness of school’s legal responsibility to communicate and educate in multiple modalities according to student need.
- Collaboration between school leadership team, Support Service, other specialists and families to develop student centred goals and individual Learning Plans.

2.2 Provision of AAC (within school and within Support Service/other specialist agencies)
- Light technology AAC resources created within schools e.g. communication books, printables.
- High technology AAC may be obtained through a combination of sources, including internal DoE resources (e.g. ICT grants) as well as external sources (e.g. National Disability Insurance Scheme, TasEquip, families self-funding, service clubs, community fundraising).

2.3 Knowledge and capacity to use and support AAC
- Developing team understanding of the purpose and application of the AAC system to meet individual needs. Attitudes, beliefs and knowledge of communication partners is critical to the success of AAC.
- Support from specialist staff to identify and implement the learning strategies associated with the AAC (including training and ongoing support of Communication Partners within the school environment).

2.4 Collective natural use of AAC
- Raise collective awareness of language learning as incidental, unplanned experiences.
• AAC is not a curriculum task; it facilitates access to the curriculum and fosters social networks.
• Focus on the communication message, rather than the mode in which it is expressed.

2.5 Communication accessible curriculum
• Access to the curriculum is a requirement for all students. A comprehensive AAC system facilitates this. Adjustments to the quantity, mode or complexity of information may be required. Multiple sensory inputs also require consideration according to student need e.g. visual, auditory, tactile, kinaesthetic, interactive, technology (light or high technology).
• Planning for a means of response/interaction for students using AAC in all learning experiences is essential.

3. Policy Requirements
Successful implementation of this policy will be achieved by:
• Outlining roles and responsibilities with new and existing staff in all schools
• Professional Development processes with all staff
• Alignment of Statement of Duties of all key stakeholders
• Comprehensive Learning Plans including SMART goals for students with CCN with regular review

4. Key Information
There is a small group of students who have complex communication needs (CCN) that impact upon their independence, autonomy, participation and competence in both education and social interactions. These students may have difficulty understanding others and/or being understood; and usually experience high levels of communication breakdown. Like all communicators they benefit from developing more than one mode of communication e.g. gesture, pointing, eye gaze, speech, writing, technology use. This is referred to as Multi-Modal Communication. Some of their communication modes incorporate specialised methods referred to as Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) e.g. key word sign, picture symbols, communication books and speech generating devices.

Acquisition of any language or communication system requires membership within a community of supportive people who are prepared to use, model, scaffold and value that communication method; and assume that the individual can be a competent communicator.

In DoE, this includes all members of the school community (e.g. principals; teachers; teacher assistants; professional support staff; students; administration staff; facility attendants; volunteers etc) as well as the individual’s family and carers. Enabling school communities to become Communication Accessible involves developing their capacity to support natural spoken language with additional communication modes. This happens in all interactions with, and in the presence of, students with CCN. This requires a process of education, training, policy, procedures, consultation and continuous evaluation. As educators and facilitators of student development we are responsible for individual student growth.

At a school and departmental level we are responsible for leading and reflecting wider community attitudes and expectations about the response to student diversity and inclusive practices.
This policy area gives DoE the opportunity to lead a wider community change about how we view and respond to individuals with communication difference and set a high standard for how to change our practices to fulfil their potential as equal citizens.

*The responsibility for changing attitudes and responses to disability belongs to everyone.*

## 5. Roles and Responsibilities

### 5.1 Secretary and Deputy Secretaries

Secretary and Deputy Secretaries must:

- Ensure the relevant Acts and Standards are adhered to, including but not limited to, *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (Cth), *Disability Standards for Education 2005* (Cth) and the *Personal Information Protection Act 2004* (Tas).
- Initiate processes for the regular review and evaluation of this Policy to ensure relevance.

### 5.2 Director Student Support, Student Support Leaders and Manager Professional Support Staff

Director Student Support, Student Support Leaders and Manager Professional Support Staff must:

- Ensure all schools and colleges are familiar with, and implement this Policy.
- Ensure professional support staff are familiar with this Policy and can support Principals and school staff to comply.

### 5.3 Principals

Principals must:

- Foster and maintain a whole school culture of multi modal communication in the school
- Facilitate collaboration between all key stakeholders
- Maintain levels of resourcing to support implementation and intervention of AAC
- Provide opportunities for staff to access relevant professional learning as required; including shadowing
- Support staff via the PDP process to develop AAC knowledge and skills
- Model the use of AAC in formal and informal situations when interacting with the student.

### 5.4 Senior Staff and Support Teachers

Senior staff and support teachers must:

- Prioritise collaboration between all key stakeholders (including parents) particularly in Learning Plan development
- Coordinate the production/sourcing of required AAC systems in conjunction with the Speech Language Pathologist
- Coordinate relief for classroom teacher/TAs to attend meetings, PD, resource planning/production
- Ensure ongoing data collection, evaluation and evidence of school/student outcomes within their school
- Create and maintain specific practices and procedures that support AAC system use across all school settings in consultation with specialist staff (e.g. SLP, OT).
5.5 Classroom Teachers

Classroom teachers must:

• Differentiate the curriculum for communication accessibility
• Plan for both the teacher and teacher assistant interaction with the student using AAC for learning instruction and incidental communication opportunities
• Collaborate with all key stakeholders in planning for the student’s Learning Plan
• Record evidence of learning and communication outcomes of students using AAC
• Engineer the classroom to create communication opportunities
• Develop/use visual supports as required.

5.6 Teacher Assistants

Teacher Assistants must:

• Prepare/use visual supports as required in conjunction with class teacher and/or SLP
• Record evidence of learning and communication outcomes of students using AAC in conjunction with class teacher.

5.7 DoE Senior Speech Language Pathologist

DoE Senior Speech Language Pathologists must:

• Ensure that this Policy and associated guidelines are implemented and adhered to by all speech pathology staff
• Ensure that all speech pathology staff are supported in this highly specialised area
• Provide access to resources, training, supervision and mentoring to enable speech pathologists to perform assessment and intervention for students who need AAC
• Ensure that school Principals are cognisant with this policy and associated guidelines and support its application in schools
• Provide opportunities for staff to access relevant professional learning as required; including shadowing
• Support staff via the PDP process to develop AAC knowledge and skills.

5.8 DoE Speech Language Pathologist

DoE Speech Language Pathologist must:

• Collaborate with all stakeholders
• Contribute to the development of individual Learning Plans
• Collaborate with Senior SLP and/or SLP with specialist experience in AAC if required
• Assess; trial; prescribe; and support implementation of communication systems and strategies as appropriate
• Write comprehensive assessment reports with recommendations for classroom based adjustments
• Design an intervention plan as part of the Learning Plan process
• Participate in and/or deliver training on AAC
• Record and share outcomes and evidence of Learning Plan for continual improvement of the intervention plan and the multimodal communication environment guided by research and evidence informed practice.
5.9 **Learners**

Learners must:

- Be encouraged to have a positive view of education, learning and AAC
- Be supported to see their AAC system as their ‘voice’
- Have input into their learning goals where possible.

5.10 **Parents/Carers**

Parents/Carers must:

- Be invited to participate in informed decision making and planning about AAC supports for their children and young people
- Be invited to participate in AAC knowledge and skills development activities with school staff
- Be supported to use AAC at home and in the community.

5.11 **Collective responsibilities of all members of school communities**

All members of school communities must:

- Protect human rights, provide equal opportunities and presume competence
- Ensure every student with Complex Communication Needs (CCN) has access to a personalised and comprehensive AAC system or systems at all times
- Foster a community of users who competently use and value various modes of communication and employ effective AAC practices
- Participate in continual AAC knowledge and skill development (e.g. through formal or informal opportunities)
- Ensure genuine opportunities for use of the AAC system with peers, whole class and wider school community
- Utilise situational specific communication supports throughout the school as required
- Provide important school documents such as rules, newsletters and notices in a communication accessible format
- Share and celebrate communication and learning achievements.

6. **Related policies**

- Nil

7. **Related procedures**

- Nil

8. **Supporting information/tools**

- Good Teaching - Differentiated Classroom Practice - Learning for All
- Good Teaching - Inclusive Schools Disability Focus
9. Definitions

Communication
The creation of shared meaning between interactants (Blackstone, 2005)

Language
The use of spoken, written, signed or other symbolic forms in conventional patterns agreed by a community of users to express and receive meanings

Speech
The expression of thoughts and ideas orally through complex movements that convert voice into decodable sounds that can be sequenced into syllables/words that carry meaning

Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC)
Includes all forms of communication (other than oral speech) that are used to express thoughts, needs, wants, and ideas. People with severe speech or language problems rely on AAC to supplement existing speech or replace speech that is not functional. Augmentative communication methods such as picture symbols, manual signs and speech generating devices are used in addition to speech, while the same methods used as alternative communication are used instead of speech. This may increase social interaction, performance, and feelings of self-worth. AAC users should be encouraged to use speech if they are able to do so. The AAC aids and devices are used to enhance their communication (American Speech-Language Hearing Association).

- Aided AAC
  » Communication symbols, techniques and strategies that use something external to the body to represent, select or transmit information (Lloyd et al, 1997). For example, picture symbols, communication book, alphabet board, speech generating device.

- Unaided AAC
  » Communication symbols, techniques and strategies that use only the body or parts of the body to represent, select or transmit information (Lloyd et al, 1997). For example, key word sign, gesture, facial expression, fingerspelling.

Examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unaided AAC</th>
<th>Aided AAC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Body Movements</strong></td>
<td><strong>Light Tech (no power)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facial expression</td>
<td>Real objects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gesture</td>
<td>Photographs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pointing, reaching</td>
<td>Pictures, logos</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unaided AAC</td>
<td>Aided AAC</td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eye gaze</td>
<td>Personal communication dictionary, e.g. Communication Passport, 'Book about Me'</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mime</td>
<td>Picture symbols e.g. Picture Communication Symbols (PCS), symbol stix, Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Word Sign (KWS) (in Australia using Auslan signs)</td>
<td>Eyegaze frame</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fingerspelling</td>
<td>Schedules, topic specific displays</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Whole word systems e.g. communication books, Pragmatic Organisation Dynamic Display (PODD)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spelling, alphabet board</td>
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</tbody>
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Multimodal Communication

Encompasses a range of communication systems and strategies as options to enable the person the greatest degree of choice in using a preferred modality in any given situation. No single method or technique will fulfil every communication need in every situation (Beukelman & Mirenda, 2013). Reliance or proficiency in only one modality for communication might leave a person vulnerable to breakdowns in communication across a range of communication contexts. (SPA Clinical Guidelines)

Complex Communication Needs (CCN)

People who for a range of physical, sensory, cognitive and environmental reasons have difficulty understanding others’ communication and/or being understood by others. Their speech and other natural communication is not effective in conveying their thoughts and ideas and they may experience frequent communication breakdown and restricted opportunities

Social Networks

Considers the social, interactional and participatory dimensions of the communication worlds of people with complex communication needs and their communication partners. A systematic way to collect information about an individual’s current and potential communication partners and the communication modes, strategies, topics and goals that will assist them to develop and extend the range of partners they communicate and interact with and thereby their participation and life experiences (Blackstone & Hunt-Berg, 2003).
**Communication Partners**

The range of people who communicate with individuals with Complex Communication Needs, including:

- **Informed Communication Partners**
  - Those who support the acquisition and/or use of AAC. This requires them to interpret, support message construction and/or physically assist with the operation of the individual’s mode/s of communication. They require specific skills in scaffolding and modelling and may require specific training to do so.

- **General Communication Partners**
  - Those people in the wider network who receive and respond to messages in a mode other than speech.

**10. Legislation**

- *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (Cth)
- *Disability Standards for Education 2005* (Cth)

**11. Supporting Information**

- National Disability Strategy 2010-2020
- Accessible Island: Disability Framework for Action 2018-2021 (Tasmanian Government)
- Communication Bill of Rights (National Joint Committee for the Communication Needs of Persons with Severe Disabilities, 2016)

**12. References**


