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Cook Government Backtracks on Disability Rights Promises: Response to the School Education Act Review

The [Australian Coalition for Inclusive Education](#) (ACIE) - a national alliance of 25 organisations representing people with disability, families, educators, students and allies - **expresses deep concern** at the Western Australian Government's response to the Final Report of the *Review of the School Education Act 1999* (WA).

Despite commissioning the review to “**serve and safeguard students with disability**,” through legislative change, the Cook Government has **rejected or deferred key reforms** its own Ministers once described as essential to “**fulfil our obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**.”

“This response is not reform - it is retreat,” said **ACIE Chairperson Stephanie Gotlib**. “After two years of rhetoric about inclusion, **the Cook Government has chosen Department-led policy tinkering over legislative change, sidelining the voices of students and families** who have waited decades for equal access to education.”

Broken Promises and Political Amnesia

When the review was launched following the recommendations of the Disability Royal Commission, the Government promised to ensure WA law “reflects contemporary understandings of disability and upholds every child’s right to inclusive education.” Under Minister Sabine Winton, that commitment has been abandoned. The Government has rejected recommendations to enshrine inclusive education and reasonable adjustments in law, instead proposing a non-legislative framework developed by the Department of Education.

“A non-legislative framework is not accountability - it is avoidance,” said **Isabella Choate**, CEO of the [Youth Disability Advocacy Network](#) (YDAN). “The promise was for **stronger rights, not more policy paperwork entrusted to a Department that has repeatedly failed children and young people with disability and their families and the teachers who support them**.”

Ignoring Expert and Community Consensus

The independent Expert Panel, chaired by **Professor Andrew Whitehouse**, made 15 evidence-based recommendations after extensive consultation with students, families, educators and advocates. Every major education stakeholder-from teacher unions to parent networks-supported legislative reform to embed inclusion, ban enrolment discrimination and establish an independent complaints body.

“The Government asked experts and communities what must change-then ignored them,” said **Symone Wheatley-Hey**, Convenor of [Square Peg Round Whole](#). **“This failure betrays everyone** who took part and **turns the Cook Government’s promises into empty words.** If the promise stands, legislate. If not, say so-because betrayal dressed as progress still betrays every child and teacher.”

The Final Report showed **unprecedented unity across the education community** - teachers, unions, principals, families and advocates **all agreed that inclusion must be embedded in law** to ensure responsibility, support and accountability.

“Teachers want to do inclusion well - but without the legislative framework, they’re being asked to build inclusive schools on shifting sand,” said **Loren Swancutt**, Chair of [Inclusive Educators Australia](#). **“When government ignores the evidence and the profession, it leaves both teachers and students to carry the cost of systemic failure.”**

A Question of Integrity and Leadership

ACIE calls on Premier Roger Cook and his Government to **reaffirm their commitment to inclusive education as a legal right, not a policy preference**, and to implement the Expert Panel’s recommendations in full.

Laura Panetta, co-founder of the [SA4I Student Alliance for Inclusion](#), said: **“The message from students with disability to the government could not be clearer: we want to learn alongside our peers, with the support and respect we are entitled to and the protection of the law.** This response fails all of us. Western Australia’s students and teachers deserve better.”

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