

Inquiry into students with a disability or special needs in New South Wales schools Responses to questions taken on notice at public hearing on 19 May 2017

Occupational Therapy Australia (OTA) was recently invited to appear at a public hearing as part of the inquiry into students with a disability or special needs in New South Wales schools.

OTA attended the public hearing in Shellharbour on Friday 19 May and was represented by Ms Anita Volkert and Dr Kim Bulkeley. OTA's responses to questions taken on notice at the hearing are provided below.

Transcript excerpt (page 23):

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: We have largely focused on the State school system. Are there the same issues in independent schools and the Catholic education system or are they different?

Dr BULKELEY: In terms of access to therapy it is the same, very patchy. I have a little bit more to do with rural independent Catholic schools and there is not a system at all that facilitates that so it just depends on the town.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Does that kind of sum up the situation: there is not a system?

Dr BULKELEY: I think so.

Ms VOLKERT: That is right, that would be a fair statement.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Of those three different school systems, the independent, the Catholic and the State, does any one do it better than the other, or is really just a question of lucky dip for the schools?

Dr BULKELEY: Local good practice is there; there are absolutely examples of local practice, but it is not about a system.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: On notice, would you be able to identify some local good practice that we could maybe recommend as a model?

Dr BULKELEY: Sure.

Answer:

Following consultation with our members, Occupational Therapy Australia has collated a number of examples of local good practice in New South Wales schools. It should be noted that although the occupational therapists who provided these examples have had positive experiences in schools, there are many others who are required to advocate in order to be allowed entry to schools to provide services to students. This is due to a number of factors, including differing policies and practices regarding the visitation of occupational therapists to schools, and a lack of awareness and understanding of the role of occupational therapists in supporting students with disability by principals and teachers.

These examples have been grouped together by common themes/features of particular service models.

Occupational therapists employed in schools

The following is an example of a school in Sydney for children with a primary diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Occupational therapists are employed by the school and operate within classes as part of the staff. In this setting OTs need to have a sound understanding of the school curriculum. Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE) is one subject in the NSW school curriculum that is closely aligned with occupational therapy. The OTs run lessons in the classroom, which may be related to OT, and the lesson plan is co-written with the teacher. This service model demonstrates the benefit of interdisciplinary approaches to the education of students with severe autism and may be a model for special schools and some special classes.

A key part of the OT's role is looking at how students engage in the school environment. Because OTs are employed by the school, they are able to assess the impact of their recommendations and adapt these as necessary. Student engagement is considered from a sensory perspective to ensure that the environment fits well with their needs and that they can work well in a group setting. Co-design with teachers and parents is a key part of this process.

Every student who is enrolled in the school has access to an OT. Full-time therapists have a caseload of approximately 15-20 students. These students have very high support needs, and as such collaboration between students, teachers, families and therapists is key.

OTs employed by this school also provide home support, however this is on an as-needed basis which is not as consistent or proactive. Home-based intervention/support is likely to be funded by the NDIS going forward. The relationship between the OT and the child's family is key to providing therapy outside of the school environment.

An occupational therapist is employed by three secondary schools in Sydney. They spend one day a week in each school.

An itinerant hearing support teacher approached the OT because the schools had some available funding. A list of students was provided to the OT along with a request for observations. Reports were written and provided to parents, and the service was offered to the students.

The OT was employed as a staff member, which was facilitated by their previous role as a teacher's aide.

The OT had an observational session with a Year 8 student in a mainstream school and wrote a report on the student's support needs. This led to increased funding for support workers and aids and equipment.

There is also likely to be a need for reporting of recommendations for special provisions for students with additional support needs to sit exams.

The schools were proactive in getting therapy support through the OT and this approach to gaining OT support has spread by word of mouth into more schools in this area.

Service delivery and research project funded by a philanthropic source

This is a four year project that includes therapy service delivery to three schools using the same therapists in the schools embedded as part of the staff learning support team. Occupational therapists will work with individual students, groups, teachers and parents with a view to growing awareness and capacity to implement strategies that promote student participation in the curriculum. The interventions are contextualised and developed with the teaching team to ensure they can be implemented in a classroom setting. The project was identified as a priority by the schools who developed a project proposal and sought external funding. It was funded by a philanthropic source.

An external academic group will direct the research component of the project to gather evidence around this model of service delivery by therapists and the sensory techniques they are using. Therefore the service delivery will also add to the evidence base by being embedded in a research project.

Group therapy approach funded by the individual school

Funded by individual school. Occupational therapists were approached to run a sensory motor program to assist students with learning self-regulation strategies for the stage 1 cohort. OTs ran the program with teachers involved, provided different sensory motor strategies and used visual supports to assist with instruction. Discussion then occurred with teachers about individual students who exhibited difficulties during the group session, and advice was provided about seeking individual support for those students.

Multidisciplinary practice servicing a large number of NDIS clients

A multidisciplinary practice provides services to 600 families (40% are receiving NDIS funding). Occupational therapists and speech language pathologists work on a weekly or fortnightly basis in 30 local schools. This practice has very strong partnerships with these schools. Their client base is children (preschool to Year 12) with learning, social, emotional and behavioural difficulties.

One of the key reasons why this practice has had such positive relationships with schools is because practitioners gather information from teachers and parents about their concerns in order to respond to each child's unique participation difficulties and to effectively service clients in the school environment. This information is then reframed in reports.

Occupational therapists providing services to students outside the classroom

Please note that the example below is of occupational therapy services being provided to students with disability within the school environment but outside the classroom. This example highlights the positive relationship between the therapist and school staff, and this arrangement may have been suitable for the students concerned. However, occupational therapists will ideally have access to classrooms to directly observe how students operate within this environment.

A private practice OT in Sydney has been working in a public school with a variety of children, some who are receiving NDIS funding and many who are not. There are a few students who are waiting for their funding. The school has allowed the OT and their colleague to use their out of school hours

(OOSH) space to conduct group and individual sessions. Being onsite means the OTs have many incidental discussions with the teachers on a regular basis and feel part of the team.

The principal at this school truly believes in inclusion and partnerships and has been extremely open to implementing any suggestions for the children in the classroom and in the playground. They are committed to helping the child and will often incorporate any of the OT's suggestions for the entire class/school. They are also very open to having regular discussions and meetings with parents. All of the families the therapist works with feel that the school is very supportive. A collaborative and constructive relationship between the school and the therapist leads to better outcomes for the students.

Occupational therapy services in state education facilities – The Queensland Education Department model

As noted in OTA's submission, there is a great deal of variation across Australia in terms of when occupational therapists are allowed access to schools to provide services to students, and whether they are directly employed by the state education department. OTA is supportive of the model adopted by the Queensland Department of Education and Training (DET), which employs OTs and physiotherapists to provide services to students with disability in state education facilities when requested by school staff.

More information about occupational therapy services in Queensland schools is available from <http://education.qld.gov.au/student-services/learning/disability/specialists/ot/>. A comprehensive document outlining the role and scope of occupational therapy and physiotherapy services in state schools can be downloaded from this page.

It should be noted that although Queensland employs OTs to work in government schools, a number of private practice OTs have reported that they have been denied access to schools. These OTs are often required to advocate to be allowed entry to the school to work with students onsite. OTA is currently engaged in ongoing discussions with the Queensland Department of Education and Training (DET) around this issue, which appears to have been exacerbated since the roll out of the NDIS began in Queensland. There may be cases where it is more appropriate for a private therapist to provide services in schools as opposed to a therapist employed by the DET, due to their expertise in a particular area.