

15.05.2024

Post-hearing responses for Inquiry into children and young people with disability in New South Wales educational settings from Charlotte Sangster, CEO of Muscular Dystrophy NSW. Please note that all names have been redacted for privacy of the parents, at their request.

It was noted by Parent 1, that they preferred to remain anonymous due to concerns of potential repercussions on themselves or the school.

**PARENT 1 = RED**

**PARENT 2 = BLUE**

**PARENT 4 - PURPLE**

**PARENT 5 = GREEN**

**OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST = ORANGE**

SLSO = School Learning Support Officer

NESA = NSW Education Standards Authority

### **Experiences and Support for Students with Disability:**

#### ***What measures do you believe could better support students with disability in educational settings?***

We believe peer connection is an important part of development & should be prioritised, ensuring those with a disability are included in all school activities with necessary adaptations made where required.

#### ***Have you encountered any barriers to safe, quality, and inclusive education for your child? If so, what are they?***

A couple of examples we have to date which I'd bucket under 'inclusion' & 'quality':

- 1) The morning of (child)'s first athletics carnival we received a panicked call from the deputy principal asking us how (child) was going to get to the track? We had completed all the necessary paperwork provided by the school, checking the box that (child) will catch the bus with all the other students. At no point in time prior to the day did they consider the fact he was a powerchair user & therefore failed to organise suitable transport for him. The deputy principal put it back on us to return to the school & drive (child) to the track in our accessible car. Our response was, we filled out the form like all the other students, so it's up to the school to organise suitable transportation for all students.
- 2) As (child) is in year 3 this year, he participated in the NAPLAN tests. We were informed very late in the piece that there are adjustments available for students with disabilities & that the school could ask for a scribe to help him which would mean he had to take the tests in a separate room so as not to disturb other students. The school incorrectly informed us that technology was not an available option for the year 3 tests even though (child) had been using his ipad on occasions in class to type responses to questions, rather than provide a written response which takes him longer to complete & he finds tiring. It's our preference for (child) to participate with his peers in these tests rather than be excluded & have to take the test by himself in another room. Upon writing to the Education Department to express our concern with regards to this exclusion due to technology not being an option for the year 3 test, we discovered that the school was wrong & he could have used technology (online or electronic (PDF format)). It turned out the school had missed the deadline to apply for the alternative format options (including

technology) & didn't want to admit that to us, so told us that a scribe was the only assistance available.

- Limited teacher's aide funding in educational settings to support in classroom - extremely difficult to get funding for SLSO support.
- Limited budget to buy adaptive equipment.
- BIG one is exam provisions with NESA not being assessed fairly for students with physical disabilities!!!!!! Unfortunately, this has resulted in students getting unfair results in HSC, pulling out, +++ anxiety in the lead up to HSC, and consequently not getting into a degree they deserve. The flow on effect is the challenge of disability employment and long-term life, social and economic outcomes.

***What impact has inadequate support had on your child and your family?***

**Thankfully, (child) hasn't really noticed the occasional lack of support, however it is a continued stress for (mother) & I. Being (child)'s advocate is now a second job for us, whether it's dealing with the NDIS, hospital administration teams or the school. Anything the government could do to make things more streamlined for those having to juggle this burden would be we received – so long is it just doesn't involve more red tape!**

The biggest challenge we have faced has been gaining support moving from a primary setting into a high school setting. Gaining access to the school to evaluate any changes that needed to occur for instance. This took a substantial amount of time and effort on my part.

My son only faced some challenges in his education settings, notably the struggle to gain access to appropriate technology for his studies. Despite needing a laptop for his HSC studies, he encountered resistance and had to fight for it, which could have potentially hindered his academic progress and inclusivity in the classroom, especially in light of him wanting to study Journalism, this was a big fight for us and a lot of NDIS funding had to be used too, to prove this was a requirement, including the Psychological impact of him not being in control of his own words.

Ensuring teachers understand my son's limitations - he can't keep up with note taking. Trying to get extra time for exams. He currently gets an extra min per 30mins, however he can't write and only types with 2 fingers and is not able to lift his arms/hands. A recent exam was to write around 400 words, my son can't write so to type he struggled to get to 300. Testing is not allowing him his full potential. NESA does not understand disability and that extra time is not an advantage, but a necessity to ensure fair testing against his peers.

***Exclusion:***

Afternoon sport days not ensuring activities for all, or even access for all, used to stay at school while most go off and do activities.

Sports & swimming carnivals:

Not arranging activities that all could participate in. Since year 5 I have kept my son at home as he didn't want to sit and watch when he couldn't participate.

Camps:

Most camp activities are physical, where someone with a disability cannot participate. Or even worse not even accessible. Our year 7 camp we were told you can stay 5km down the road and join the year on the campgrounds during the day but most will be off doing activities.

Classroom, high tables were introduced as hard for my son to fit under a low desk. In some classes they only got one table so he sat high and had no option to be able to sit with his mates.

Learning Support Coordinators - not knowing how many hours they were funded for until around March. This was in primary, but may have changed now as he has full time LSO. Having LSOs that have no experience with disability is a huge challenge.

Ideas to help:

With regards to support needs we were fortunate to be able to advocate for a cross over period when my son transitioned from Primary to Secondary school. Two SLSO's who cared for my son in primary school spent 4 weeks educating new staff on his needs. One of these SLSO'S even went on school camp with him. This absolutely helped him feel comfortable and supported during the transition . It also helped the new staff understand his needs.

## **2. What measures could better support our kids as they participate in education?**

The above is essential. I am also a strong believer that SLSO staff understand their role is to not be needed. It is important and essential they provide the required care and support an individual needs but they also help the student to advocate for themselves. Teach them to be as independent as possible even if this is just independence of thought. No I don't want my lunch right now etc

Establish clear and efficient processes for accessing camp accommodations and resources for students with disabilities. This includes ensuring that necessary tools, such as laptops or assistive technology, are readily available without unnecessary hurdles. Support plans tailored to each student's unique needs, plans should outline specific camp accommodations for example, support services, and goals to promote inclusivity including excursion/carnivals access etc. Train educators in inclusive teaching practices and provide ongoing professional development opportunities for educators to enhance their understanding of disability issues and inclusive teaching strategies. Promote awareness and acceptance of disability within the school community to educate all the community, not just staff.

Using physio and OTs to support inclusion in school activities.

High school using exam observations to help support reasonable adjustments for HSC. NESA (NSW Education Standards Authority) does not seem to understand, NESA should provide schools with observation sheets to help understand what a student is capable of to then have a reasonable adjustment for NAPLAN or HSC. It is well known that NESA do not allow much in the way of an adjustment. I feel like I am setting my son up for failure, not success, as he will not be able to get the ATAR he wants with the limitations he has and the adjustments that NESA are most likely to allow.

## **What barriers have you encountered that impact being safe, having quality and inclusive education?**

Safety has to do with lack of training and understanding of individual needs. Not all students are the same. Quality and inclusive education in a school starts with the principal's acceptance that providing access is different to providing equitable education. Quality education across all state school should in theory be the same but I can talk from experience it is far from that. Quality teachers are few and far between. Teachers are generally trying to do their best but are often over worked and overwhelmed by the variety of needs presented to them in every classroom. The level and variety of need in our high schools exploded since Covid. Teacher fatigue absolutely affects their ability to provide quality inclusive education.

Inaccessible school facilities /excursion facilities/camp facilities to enable (child) to navigate his environment safely and independently, lack of accessible transportation.

Main barrier I have ever encountered was dealing with the leadership of the diversity team, and the inappropriate comments they have made with regards to (child). They do not seem to understand what students with disability think and feel about inclusion. They need to listen more to parents and students.

Education dept need to either train LSOs to care for students, or engage with Support Workers to attend the camps. I have always gone to all camps (and excursions) up to year 7, he has not been able to attend the last one as it was camping. In high school years this is

where bonding of new friendships occurs, and he has missed out as he is not able to share the stories or experience the same. He is feeling more excluded as he gets old.

It should be a requirement that school-based camps are accessible, and schools need to ensure activities for all. Obviously physical won't be but to use Physio & OT to think outside the box.

#### **Benefits and Outcomes:**

***From your perspective, what benefits do you think all children could experience if students with disability are provided with adequate support?***

It goes without saying that if adequate supports are provided to students with disabilities, they will enjoy their time at school, feel connected with their peers & be more likely to continue their studies at the tertiary level. Another benefit is that all students at the school are exposed to a person living with a disability & learn from a young age that they are just like them.

***How do you believe improving outcomes for students with disability could positively impact social, economic, and personal aspects?***

Improved outcomes for students with a disability increases their chance of securing employment & becoming a valued, self-sufficient member of the community. From the government's perspective, this would also likely lower the level of financial support required through their employed years.

#### **Educator Experiences and Resources:**

***Can you share any experiences or insights regarding teachers, early childhood educators, or learning support staff who have roles in educating children with disability?***

Please refer to the 'inclusion' & 'quality' examples given above.

***What measures do you think would adequately resource and empower educators in supporting children with disability?***

An improved connection between the NDIA & the Education Department. In our experience, the NDIA is quick to point the finger at the Education Department if there are any grey areas when it comes to assistive technology or core supports that may be used in the educational environment. If these departments were better linked, the educators wouldn't have to go through the process of sourcing equipment if it's already been flagged as a requirement in a student's NDIS plan.

- If funding is available, the amount of time to get the funding is so difficult with limitations on cut-off times being rigid e.g. twice a term.
- Inclusion on camps and excursions (and offsite sports) takes additional time planning and resources eg hire of equipment, activity adaptations, hire of an accessible bus is more costly. There should be additional financial support for add-on costs such as hiring an accessible bus or hire of electric beds/ commodes - so that the burden isn't on the school.
- quicker funding to help schools be more accessible in time for critical transitions.

***Any stories (good or bad) of learning support staff?***

Creating strong trusting relationships with learning support staff is essential. Learning support staff provide a safety net for children with physical needs.

During an excursion to Luna Park, despite clear instructions and prior arrangements for my son's engagement, an SLSO failed to follow through. Instead of facilitating my son's participation in activities tailored to his abilities, she neglected his needs and focused on hanging hats and bags off his wheelchair. This disregard for my son's inclusion and enjoyment of the outing was disheartening to say the least.

LSO's - consistency and having back up if they are away has always been key. In primary I was called to school just to take him to the bathroom as his 2 LS were away.

**Positive Experience:**

Despite the negative encounter, my son's school generally demonstrated inclusivity. They allowed him to participate in drama classes during sport time, recognising his interests and providing opportunities for involvement. Additionally, efforts were made to ensure accessibility during camps and excursions, with attempts to include my son in all aspects of the activities as much as possible. My son was even School Leader for his Sports Club in Year 12.

**Resourcing and Environment:**

***What are your thoughts on the current resourcing available to educational settings in New South Wales to support children with disability?***

(child)'s SLSO's currently cover 3 children in his class. I'm not sure on how the funding works, but I wouldn't want the ratio to get any smaller than that.

***How important is infrastructure in creating a supportive environment for children with disability?***

Appropriate infrastructure is vital to ensuring students with a disability feel valued & included in the school community. All necessary building in the school should be fully accessible, preferably using the same entrance to the buildings as other students rather than having to use an alternate access point by themselves.

An unfortunate story we can share on this topic relates to a school tour we attended at a prominent private High School in our local area in 2019. (mother) asked the admissions lady how accessible the school was & her first response was that it would cost the school money to make all the buildings accessible... Needless to say, we won't be sending our kids there!

**Safety and Inclusion:**

***What measures do you believe are necessary to ensure the learning environment is safe and inclusive for all students, teachers, and school support staff?***

More experienced or educated staff. This could be learning and support staff and or SLSO staff.

Training, Professional development opportunities to enhance their knowledge and skills in supporting children with physical disabilities, could include workshops, seminars, webinars, and peer mentoring programs etc. I felt that a lot of teachers were willing to support but didn't have the knowledge, exposure of means of knowing how to adapt for example a sport so my son so he could be included. Need to ensure educators have access to resources and tools that facilitate the inclusion of students with physical disabilities in the classroom and other aspects of school. The kids get left in the sideline quite a bit.

I think education needs a leader with a background/hand on in a disability related field, not study based learning only. I know education has their own OT & Physio, the school should organise a meeting with students to ensure they understand the disability. They need to know not all disabilities are the same.

And a student with a physical disability should not be grouped with all children with disabilities (intellectually disabled).

Education to schools is essential to ensure the assumption is always inclusion & not a question about whether they want to attend an activity because of their disability.

Participation in school camps is always extremely difficult. During the senior years even at the upper primary level camp becomes about providing access to physical challenges. As a way of providing access to mental growth. An aspect of life the mainstream student who plays a load of computer games is no longer presented with. For a student with physical needs this can be very difficult. I am seriously not sure how this can be changed without changing the focus of the camp.

Utilising NDIS funding for my son's personal carer and equipment and report requirements for camp in particular, leaving less room for other necessities. Dealing with the logistics of securing adequate support services and managing NDIS funding was emotionally draining at times. Feel this should be the school's (Education Dept) responsibility but had to use as my son would have missed out otherwise.

How have policies regarding suspensions and expulsions impacted children with disability?

**Open-Ended:**

***Are there any other related matters you would like to address or bring to the attention of the committee?***

- Considerable time, NDIS funding working with school to help ensure work is completed to be accessible.
- Funding assigned to (child) not always used for him. Again, you need to be vigilant and fight his corner.
- School needs training on accessible sports carnivals and other opportunities. They need to understand what is possible and facilitate the kids getting involved. My son left on the sideline for athletics carnival and cross country etc. it is up to me (super busy) to figure out how to make it accessible. Need training or advice given to school.
- Schools try best with camps however not very accessible. Need advice on ideas to be more inclusive. Need to arrange for someone to help them rather than relying on parent support.

- The classroom set up has been quite good for (child) - flexible with what is needed.
- We had to push hard for (child) to be able to use the lift and for the school to find the lift maintenance so he could use it.
- We are new to Highschool, but I am sure you have lots of points below to go from.