

STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL ISSUES

Inquiry into transition support for students with a disability or complex needs and their families

RESPONSE TO SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTIONS

Ms Jill Dean, President, NSW Schools for Specific Purposes Principals' Network

Ms Anne Flint, Vice- President, NSW Schools for Specific Purposes Principals' Network

1. In your submission you list “red tape” as a factor that impinges on the adequacy and accessibility of support in transition (p.2). Can you give examples of what you mean by this?
 - Placement process is long, convoluted and drawn out by requirements for students to be assessed and ‘labelled’ prior to completing the Access/Request online process at their local primary school;
 - Requests for Placements in SSPs come from Learning Support Teams in local mainstream school. Parents of a student with a disability provide all the information then have no more contact with this school. The quality of the information presented is variable, depending on the knowledge and understanding of the child’s disability. When the student is placed in the SSP, the new school is required to hold another Learning Support Team meeting and repeat above process. This maybe the families only contact with their local school;
 - As a Regional resource, SSP Principals have no role in supporting parents from the beginning of their journey to school “as it may lead to an expectation that the student will be placed at your school.” SSPs have a greater capacity to understand the issues and implications of a student’s disability and be welcoming to these families. Recommendation: SSPs should have the same authority to support parents to complete the paperwork required by Regional Placement Panels. This could reduce the number of meetings parents are required to attend prior to school entry and provide the school with comprehensive information pertaining to the student.
 - The timing of Placement Panels is inconsistent and can be held very late in any given year, reducing the opportunity to develop and implement a comprehensive transition plan;
 - Lack of available spaces to support requests by parents means a long and involved processes at Regional Level to apply for additional classes. Recommendation: If schools have the capacity/space to grow, Principals to have authority to request new classes as per mainstream principal’s authority, and reduce “wait” times for parents to be informed of future placement.
 - For many children under 6 years with complex disabilities, there are no assessments that are reliable indicators of the student’s intellectual level. Too much of School Counsellors time is spent assessing students. School Counsellors need the ability to have the time to counsel and support families at a time when many families are still grieving for their child. Recommendation: Release pressure on School Counsellors by ensuring Kindergarten class sizes in SSPs be fixed at 6 students with multiple and complex disabilities until testing instruments become more reliable at around 6 years of age.
2. The NSW Government submission notes (p.5) that there is no statewide integrated action plan for children with additional or complex needs. If such an action plan were it be developed, what key areas would it address?
 - Minimum standards for disability support e.g. access to early intervention, ongoing therapy requirements
 - Support with coordinating therapy services, medical screening, psychometric assessment, transition support e.g. learning about options, choosing appropriate option and applying for appropriate option.
 - Specialised equipment and/or technology needs identified and requested
 - Accommodations and adjustment required for learning
 - Behavioural support
 - Designated early childhood support workers in DEC and ADHC to coordinate and support transition to school, in sufficient numbers to be effective.

- State or national register of children likely to require special education services. Some are well known from birth or the very early years of life, but education systems may not know of that child until close to school starting age, making availability of services and coordinated transition difficult.
- Additional resources (money to buy time) allocated to schools to support effective transition processes

3. How does the availability and accessibility of therapy service impact on effective transitions for students with a disability or other additional needs?

- Therapy services often stop when a student enrolls in school. Schools then need to refer to ADHC for service – long waiting lists.
- Many students in low socio-economic area and from non-English speaking backgrounds may not have had an early intervention of therapy support.
- GPs need to be given lots of information to steer families in the direction of early affordable support
- Availability of qualified therapist with an understanding of communication development for students with significant complex communication disabilities. Under current arrangements where therapy service have been out-sourced to non-government providers, there has been a significant increase in programs that are not of sufficient quality or understanding of students with complex communication needs. Recommendation: Therapy training and certification in working with children with disabilities and complex communication needs at the degree level or higher.

4. What particular issues do students with mental health or behaviour issues face?

- Students with significant intellectual and complex challenging behaviours: In a school setting can be supported structural supports with routines, visual communication, predictable , context drive ... When this environment and people change, can cause additional stress on the young person, Providers are often not trained to support these students; program fails;
- Lack of available support places at post-school level.
- Lack of expertise and resources in mainstream settings.
- Lack of expertise and resources available for post-school providers.
- Students being inappropriately placed in special education settings for students with intellectual disability because of lack of available mental health services.
- Lack of/non-existent services for students with an intellectual disability with an additional mental health or behaviour issue.
- No follow-up support for students exiting Juvenile Justice who too often disengage with school.

5. What recommendations should the Committee consider making, to improve transition support for students with a disability or complex needs and their families:

- For families who have a child with significant needs there should be a single Regional/District access point. It should be known to all “prior to school” services where options can be explained, assessments organised, therapy needs established and equipment support organised where families are supported to complete paperwork requirement and case managed by a single person.
- DEC Regional access point for referrals with consistent application dates (known to all service providers e.g. pre-schools, early intervention services, therapy service providers, ADHC, DOCS, GPs hospitals and paediatricians)
- Early childhood coordinator positions established to locate students, link with and coordinate enrolment process.

- Case management for enrolment of students with disabilities (all agencies funded appropriately to do this). Could be school led but schools do not have sufficient time to support the case management of current students.
- Consistent levels of support across the state – e.g. all new students entering kindergarten having appropriate staffing levels according to need, not label (not regional variation as occurs at present)
- Therapy training and certification in working with children with disabilities and complex communication needs at the degree level or higher.
- SSPs should have the same authority to support parents to complete the paperwork required by Regional Placement Panels. This could reduce the number of meetings parents are required to attend prior to school entry and provide the school with comprehensive information pertaining to the student.
- Allow Principals of SSPs to have the same authority to request new classes as per mainstream principal responsibility, should schools have the need and capacity/space to grow.
- Release pressure on School Counsellors to support families by ensuring Kindergarten class sizes in SSPs be fixed at 6 students with multiple and complex disabilities until testing instruments become more reliable at around 6 years of age.