



Australian Government

Department of Education, Employment
and Workplace Relations



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Teresa McMichael
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Standing Committee on Social Issues
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Dear Ms McMichael,

RE: Clarification of points and supplementary questions for witnesses: Inquiry into transitional support for students with additional and/or complex needs

Please find below three points of clarification and our response to the supplementary questions asked following our appearance before the Standing Committee on Social Issues on 10 October 2011. Also enclosed are our transcript amendments and witness feedback questionnaires.

Clarification around Support Teacher Transition (STT) restructure

We incorrectly stated that the position with overall state responsibility for the STT program was disbanded after the previous person left. In fact the new permanent occupant who has recently commenced does have the same position: Coordinator, Post School Transitions, Department of Education and Communities. Our apologies for this misunderstanding.

We are aware of a restructure within the South Western Sydney region which has impacted on the STT program. This restructure took place approximately six years ago when the districts became regions. At this time most STTs were physically relocated out of district offices and into a school. This physical move has made it more difficult for STTs to maintain a relationship or regular contact with other regional staff and to gain access into other schools in their area. STTs have always had to be invited into schools and there is no mandate that the schools have to make use of these expert regional resources. STTs report that there is a lack of understanding of their role and how to access them within schools, frequent staff changes and complexities around the responsibility of school staff. Additionally, there is insufficient knowledge and training around disability including obligations under the Disability Standards of Education. Within some schools, these issues make it difficult to raise awareness of the importance of STT involvement. Current resourcing levels also mean that it would not be possible for STTs to work closely with all schools.

Clarification around access to personal care at TAFE and university

We have received clarification that neither TAFE nor university has funding to provide personal care services. DEEWR specifically prevents higher education providers from claiming funding for personal care support. Students often do not have access to sufficient hours of support from external sources (ie from Aging Disability and Home Care) to enable them to have an attendant carer with them at educational settings. This is particularly an issue for people whose care needs arose through a non-compensable incident or disability. Additionally, for students who received personal care at school, and assistance from family at home (ie those who have never used paid attendant carers before), the process of eligibility assessment and securing support

can take significant time and mean a delay in commencing further education. A survey on this issue, *What is the matter with personal care?*, conducted by the Australian Tertiary Education Network on Disability in 2008, identified that because of these issues, prospective students may not seek enrolment at all, or may only be able to participate part time based on how much personal care support or family support they can secure. We hope the commencement of the recently announced federal National Disability Insurance Scheme may alleviate some of these issues.

Clarification around coherence between State and Federally funded services

Through our vocational support networks, we have been made aware of an issue that existed around a lack of coherence between State and Federal Services. This related to the ADHC funded Transition to Work Program not being recognised by Centrelink. In their system the phrase 'Transition to Work' referred to two programs not related to disability. While this phrase seems to have been removed from the Centrelink system, the ADHC funded program may not be seen as an acceptable training course which can lead to young people in receipt of Youth Allowance being referred to other DEEWR funded programs (eg Disability Employment Services) with job seeking requirements in order to retain their payments. If the young person is in receipt of the Disability Support Pension, it is not a problem. This situation requires individual advocacy to resolve and reinforces the need to ensure that any new services or changes implemented through this inquiry 'fit' with Federal programs and services.

Response to supplementary questions

- 1. What do you see as the main barriers to seamless transitions between schools, post-school and employment?**
- A lack of clarity, the stigma of using, and differing definitions of the word 'disability' used by schools and post-school education providers. In schools, the word disability is primarily used for funded students with a disability confirmation sheet. However this often excludes the 80% of students with hidden disabilities including mental illnesses, chronic medical conditions and learning disabilities. These students are often not aware that their condition is considered a disability under the Disability Discrimination Act, and therefore not aware that they are eligible for support in post-school settings. Students who have been in the Learning Assistance Program due to a learning 'difficulty' often do not know why they are in this program or that they could access support after school. Young people and parents of students with invisible disabilities are reluctant and at times adamant that the word does not apply to them. The importance is not a label, but of understanding the broad legislative definition and the availability of resources to help them "access their ability". In fact, while NDCOs support the Board of Studies decision to change the name of Special Provisions in Exams to Disability Provisions, we are now concerned that those students with mental health conditions or chronic medical conditions will be reluctant to apply for provisions which will help them reach their potential.
- Inadequate early transition planning support in schools. The new transition advisors employed by some schools are not trained in the needs of students with disability and Support Teachers Transition (STTs) are not adequately resourced to work with all students, instead having a focus on funded students. National Disability Coordination Officers (NDCOs) are not funded or resourced sufficiently to reach all schools in their regions, and both STTs and NDCOs face challenges in gaining access to schools as schools are not mandated to access these services. While it is critical to develop disability awareness in all staff and work towards universal design, regional expert advice will always be essential to ensuring the best outcomes as students with disabilities transition from school.
- A lack of available support in the period between when school ends (end of term 3 for year 12 students) and when post school programs start the following year (as late as March). Student's aspirations and options often change during this time – either because they achieved better or worse than expected. Without access to support from school or another organisation, students may opt out of further study and not link up with any support or program. Even for students who will access a post-school education setting or ADHC post-school program, this gap in time between school and when services start often places a financial and emotional burden on families.

A lack of access to assistive technology for school leavers with complex disabilities. Currently any technology that is provided through school does not move with the school leaver into post-school settings, leaving them to have to source these resources again. This often takes time, leaving students with a gap in access to technology during the critical transition period.

2. What recommendations do you think the Committee could make to improve transition support for students with additional or complex needs and their families?

- Training school staff to use the word 'disability' with students and parents not as a label, but as a way to understand the broad legal definition and the available services. Improve transparency within schools of why students are accessing the learning assistance program, i.e. that although you may not be a funded student with disability at school, you do have a disability under the Act and may be entitled to support in post-school settings.
- Ensure new transition advisors within schools receive training in supporting students with disability and expand funding of STTs to allow them to effectively gain access to schools and support all students with disability. As above, the twin tracking approach is important: staff in local schools need disability awareness and they also need regional expert support. It is just not possible for local school staff to be aware of the range of post school options available to students with disability as well as support students without disability in the transition process.
- Lobby for the continuation and expansion of the NDCO program. The program is uniquely placed to play the role of improving linkages between the school, further education and training, and employment sectors. In particular, increase resourcing and broaden the scope of the program to allow NDCOs to offer transition support during the period after students leave school and before post-school programs commence.
- Ensure sufficient funding to enable all students with need to access support in post-school settings – eg. huge demand for support of students with Asperger's at TAFE however they currently do not have specialised Teacher/Consultants supporting them – but 'float' between the intellectual and neurological Teacher/Consultants who have very large caseloads. . Students with Asperger's and Autism, more than any other type of disability, need a very structured transition program to employment, TAFE or university and there are very limited programs.
- Promote increased marketing and other initiatives at the National, State and Local levels around disability acceptance and inclusion. Many barriers imposed on people with disability are the result of other people's lack of awareness or reduced expectations of people with disability.
- Work with The Department of Education and Communities to ensure that the new "Local Schools, Local Decisions" initiative does not make it even more difficult for regional staff such as Support Teachers Transition to access schools. The report available at <http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/news/announcements/yr2011/aug/local-schools-local-decisions.pdf> states "The Department of Education and Communities will be working with principals, teachers, support staff, parents and the community to look closely at how we can enable schools to make better decisions and achieve the best outcomes for students" (p.11). An important part of achieving the best outcomes is ensuring that students with disabilities have access to the support they are entitled to.

3. How do students with a disability find out about the support services that are available to them? How can this be improved?

- In our experience, students with disability and their families find out about support services haphazardly. Those students who are 'funded' and have a disability confirmation sheet are more likely to have access to support from an STT (or Catholic or Independent Transition Advisor) who will inform them of support available in post-school settings. However, students who are not funded may not even be aware that their condition is classed as a disability under the Act, and therefore may not know that they are eligible for support. In South-Western Sydney, Western Sydney, and Inner Sydney, the STTs run post-school options expos which are very useful for those families who attend. However not all students who would be eligible for support in post-school pathways find out about these expos. Similarly, the NDCO program invests significant time into raising awareness of support services, for example through professional development activities, resources, newsletters and presentations. However with no mandate to encourage schools to take up this information, we have little control over how, or whether, a school utilises or passes on this information.

- Recommendations as above.

For further information please contact myself or Nicole Ison, WSNDCO Team Leader, on 02

Yours sincerely

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28th October 2011