

## **STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL ISSUES**

### **Inquiry into transition support for students with additional or complex needs and their families**

#### **SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTIONS FOR WITNESSES**

**Ms Rowena Stulajter, Community Development Manager, NSW Parents' Council Inc**

**Sharon, Parent**

**Joint questions for Ms Stulajter and Sharon:**

- 1. How do you think that families, parents and communities can be better involved a child's transitions?**

A formalised transition process needs to be implemented in schools across NSW. The process needs to include the establishment of a transition planning team and transition plan; which is monitored and implemented. The transition process needs to be person centred and driven by the student with a disability and their family.

The formation of a transition team would assist in developing goals, identifying problems, creating solutions and establishing links between support services. The young person and their family need to have responsibility for choosing the members of the planning team. Families and young people should be empowered and take the lead role in determining decisions which impact on their life.

The team could include people from the young person's support network, such as peers, friends, classmates and extended family who provide informal support. One person from the team should be identified as the transition coordinator and will assist the young person and his or her family in moving the Transition Plan forward. The group could consist of professionals supporting the young person and family such as social workers, teachers, therapists etc.

The development of a transition plan is critical. There is an excellent model in British Columbia. Refer to the community support plan document attached, developed by the Ministry of Children and Family Development. The model is an excellent example of how a transition planning process can benefit a young person with a disability and their family.

Individual Education Plan (IEP) teams could be another way of addressing transition support. Genuine parent participation, active involvement in and a true contribution to the planning process is critical to achieving good transition results. IEP's are not mandated and there appears to be different processes depending upon the school. There need to be clear guidelines and processes in regards to IEP's across the school sectors.

Young people with disabilities often do not attend IEP meetings, yet alone participate in the meetings. One of the challenges is that IEP goals are mostly determined by the school and not the parent or student with a disability. Schools should be responsible for bringing in representatives from other community organisations to be part of the transition planning process. There are excellent models for IEP's in the United States. A document is attached which outlines best practice in South Dakota for IEP's and transition planning.

There also needs to be a review of the transition process. Ideally the transition coordinator should organise a final planning session. A meeting should take place just before the student with a disability is nearing the end of high school. The transition plan should be finalised, tasks and objectives achieved by the planning group to date need to be identified, and any transition planning goals or objectives that have not been accomplished should be addressed.

2. The NSW Government submission states that 'transition could be strengthened if processes were established to enable the sharing of relevant information for all children and young people across educational settings' (p 7). How do processes for sharing information currently work?

One of the challenges is that the different school sectors do not talk to each other. There needs to be a change in culture. Many schools see that they are competing with each other for student numbers. As principals are paid per student head and it is a number crunching exercise, there appears to be a general reluctance for schools to share information. Many schools principals will not talk to the school principal of another school that they are in competition with.

It is surprising that some high schools often do not even communicate with primary school feeder schools in regards to transition support. School staff are busy and often overwhelmed. Transition support creates more work for already overloaded staff. . Teacher casual relief costs around \$660 per day. Schools often cannot find the resources to relieve teachers to attend IEP or transition planning meetings. Funding and resourcing for the transition area across school sectors would be beneficial.

A transition co-ordinator could be the person responsible for sharing the information and co-ordinating the transition plan. The person would be appointed by the student with a disability and their family.

3. How soon before a child moves from one setting to another do you think transition planning should start, and how long do you think it should continue after they have moved? Do you think there are any barriers to this?

Transition ideally should start a few months before the change occurs. Issues such as peer friendships, buddies, transport, etc all require proper planning.

In terms of transitioning to high school there are other issues such as the ability of your child to cope with many changes, such as having six periods at high schools with different teachers. There are various organisational and planning supports that need to be put in place.

Best practice indicates that post school transition planning should start from 14 years of age. There needs to be more information for families in regards to proper planning. A family friendly booklet in different languages would help, which would include a checklist and guide.

The monitoring of the transition to a new school or setting is often overlooked. It is important to monitor and review the change and the impact on the student with a disability.

**Questions for Ms Stulajter:**

4. In your submission you say that transition planning requires a number of meetings to prepare, plan and implement a successful transition (p 5). How many meetings do you think there should be, and at what stages should they be held?
5. You say in your submission that transition planning should begin as early as possible (p 5). How soon before a child transitions do you think the transition planning should start? Are there any barriers to starting the planning process early?
6. In your submission you discuss the need for transition coordinators (p 6). Do many schools in New South Wales provide transition coordinators?

**Questions for Sharon:**

1. How did you find out about the range of services, supports and options that are available to your family?

The service system in NSW is very fragmented. It is difficult for families to navigate through the system as it is so complex. Fortunately, I have a vast knowledge because I work within the community sector. It is a struggle for many families, particularly families where English is a second language.

The disability sector is vast and there is confusion for families as to their eligibility for services. There is a lot of jargon and the language is not easy to take in. Service types are so varied and it is confusing. Families have to navigate through finding services such as respite, home care, community transport, personal care etc.

Many families do not have a case manager to co-ordinate services. Families have to repeat their story over and over to each individual service. Services often do not talk to each other. There is also duplication and inequity. Some families might receive respite from three different services, while other families are on long waiting lists without services.

Despite my vast knowledge, I still struggled with finding out what was available. For example, I applied for my daughter to attend the local public school which has IM and IO classes. We were refused enrolment on the basis of living just outside the school geographical zone for enrolments. I later found out that DEC has to cater for my daughter regardless of where we live given her disability. I have strong advocacy skills and still felt intimidated at times. I had to fight for my daughter to attend main stream school.

High school is very difficult. There are not many options for supports in mainstream high schools. It has been a steep learning curve. I have a sound knowledge of the school sector and still found this a difficult process. It is hard for families to find a school which has funding and support.

There is a big black hole when it comes to funding support in high schools. We are paying for our daughter to go to an independent school where there is a disability unit. The only

other option is one local high school which has many cultural issues within the way the school is run. We need a supportive environment for our daughter so if it means that we will not eat and work longer hours in higher paying jobs, then so be it!

2. Were there any positive aspects of Amber's transitions that you think other schools could learn from?

St Lucy's Special School at Wahroonga has great processes for transition planning. The IEP meetings and the planning discussions are excellent examples of best practice. Schools could really learn from St Lucy's as the school involves parents as a primary decision maker in all planning.

St Lucy's carefully planned Amber's transition back into the satellite class from the mainstream setting. The teaching staff came out to see Amber at her old school to watch her in the class room. Amber also attended a day in her new school environment prior to attending.

St Lucy's also observed Amber on the playground. Her interaction with other students was observed and she was matched up with a school buddy. Amber's confidence increased as a result of the social interactions that she had on the playground. St Lucy's seem to look holistically at the child. Skills such as independence are considered important. Amber also focused on her living skills as part of the transition to high school. Travel training was provided as well as increasing her money skills.

3. The Committee heard evidence at its last hearing that parents find it frustrating to have to re-tell their story many times, and provide 'proof' of a disability repeatedly. Has this been your experience with Amber's schooling? How might this be overcome?

Many parents report this, and this is partially because of the fragmentation of the service system. Families with children with high support needs often have multiple services going into the home. Parents have to repeat their story over and over to each new service provider or new school setting.

It is also costly, trying to prove that your child has a disability. For instance, parents also get asked to provide a WISC assessment for proof that their child has an intellectual disability. It costs a couple of hundred dollars for an assessment after medicare. Personally, this assessment is not useful. We need to move towards an annual functional assessment. My daughter has many physical and sensory issues which are not reflected in the current tools for assessment.

Families are forced into using the worst assessments to get the funding. In one test my daughter was diagnosed with a moderate intellectual disability. In the same test a year later she was diagnosed with a mild intellectual disability.

In terms of repeating our story we have had vast experience as Amber has been in so many settings. Amber attended five different pre-school settings between the age of 18 months and five years of age. We tried to secure a place in a community pre-school so that we could access funding support.

There were long waiting lists and eventually Amber was able to attend Naremburn Community Pre-school two days per week where there was some funding support. Amber attended a private pre-school the other three days per week. We trialled Cromehurst for less than a term as the school did not match Amber's needs. The other children seemed to have more moderate to high support needs. We had to continually repeat our story over and over to each pre-school.

The first two years of Amber's schooling was a challenge. Amber went to St Lucy's Start Right at Wahroonga four days a week and then St Thomas, our local primary school for one day per week. Amber then went into full-time mainstream at St Thomas in year 1. She was a year behind as she attended the Start Right program for 2 years.

When Amber attended the mainstream primary school we would have to re-educate her new teacher every year, in regards to her needs. We would go through the same process over and over again every time. It was like starting all over!

Going into mainstream full-time was not as easy as we thought. Amber was lucky to receive 2 hours of support per week. The school's Learning Support teacher was very committed and she worked really hard with Amber, however the funding was just not adequate. Amber went from an environment at St Lucy's where she had so much support, to being expected to be fully independent within a large class room of up to 32 students. There was little monitoring of Amber's progress.

Being quiet and shy she became further lost. Amber would play by herself on the playground. She was a loner and seemed to be losing her confidence. Amber was also being bullied.

By year 4, Amber still struggled to read and write. The gap between Amber and her peers was widening. I had always kept the St Lucy's Aim High program in the back of my mind as an option. It was hard however I rang the principal Jo Karolis and agreed that Amber would benefit from Aim High.

In year 5 Amber again changed schools. She moved to St Johns at Narraweena, St Lucy's satellite class. St Lucy's again was there for us. The planning and care taken to support Amber to move across helped relieve our stress and concern as parents. Since being at St John's, Amber has thrived. Her academic ability has improved so much. It is her confidence and self esteem that has changed shape. We found that we didn't have to keep repeating ourselves with St Lucy's. The school had a great understanding of Amber and her needs. There was also sensitivity around what families go through.

Most families are planning high school when children are born. When you have a child with a disability you cannot plan until you know how they have progressed. It is difficult to gauge where your child will be and which setting would suit your child's needs.

Amber's Individualised Education Plans (IEPs) has been a good foundation for transition planning and we have discussed independent skills and other life skills areas.

We are now preparing for high school and entering the next stage of transition. Amber will attend Brigidine College at St Ives as there is a special support unit. We now have new challenges such as how to get Amber travel trained to catch a bus and train.