Submission
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INQUIRY INTO TRANSITION SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH ADDITIONAL OR COMPLEX NEEDS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Organisation: Down Syndrome NSW

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Down Syndrome NSW

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

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Down Syndrome NSW

80 Weston Street,
Harris Park NSW 2150

Phone: 02 9841 4444 or 02 9841 4409
Fax: 02 9841 4400

www.dsansw.org.au

Postal address:
PO Box 9117
Harris Park NSW 2150

Chief Executive Officer: **Stephen Clarke**

Compiled and edited by Jill O'Connor, Information Officer, and James Birdsall, Research and Development Officer, August 2011

Down Syndrome NSW is a family support organization established in 1980 to represent and respond to the interests of people with Down syndrome and their families.

During that time, a lot of time and experience have centred around the educational needs of students with Down syndrome, and the families who care for and support them. Transitions in education have been and continue to be the subject of many inquiries, and their management has sometimes caused considerable distress for families.

It is well documented that people with Down syndrome of all ages find transitions difficult, from seemingly small transitions from one activity to another to major transitions such as starting school, to change of teachers, moving into different stages of education, and leaving secondary school. We also know that well managed, transitions can be much smoother and less anxiety provoking for students, their families and their schools, than is sometimes the case.

It is clear that inequities within public education in NSW, both between students with and without disabilities and between students with disabilities, can be amplified at major transition periods, as families report a wide range of experiences from smooth, well supported transitions to major disruptions, lack of information, inaccurate and untimely responses and removal of supports.

A number of themes emerge from our discussions with families about transitions in education:

- Families need to know what options are available, the strengths and challenges in each, and the processes that are required to implement the options they choose
- Students and families need to have adequate time to make informed choices and to prepare for transitions
- Families need to be assured that support will continue to be adequate, as educational settings change.
- For some families, the difficulty of each or any transition can be amplified by the experience of ‘revisiting’ the child’s diagnosis with Down syndrome, and the process of coming to terms with difference
- Families are a valuable source of expertise and information about their individual child, and about the impacts of Down syndrome in general, during transitional periods

From discussion with teachers and other school personnel, different themes emerge:

- Teachers need to be able to plan for smooth transitions
- Teachers need information and professional development education to meet the educational needs of students with Down syndrome adequately
- Transition plans for the playground and other areas outside of the classroom are necessary

Good communication is a feature of successful transitions for both families and schools:

- Transitions in education only proceed smoothly with adequate and timely communication between families, school and the Department of Education and Training

Each of these points will be amplified, with examples, in this submission. We focus on those things that need to be improved, as that is assumed to be the Inquiry's prime interest.

Families need to know what options are available, the strengths and challenges in each, and the processes that are required to implement the options they choose

Families should be readily able to access information to all of the options available for their child's education. The Department of Education and Training's website has undergone considerable redevelopment over the last two years, and the amount of information and the ease of navigation is much appreciated by families, for example:

- the identification of schools with support classes and schools for specific purposes within the School Locator function has been very useful
- contact information for regional offices has been useful
- policy and procedure documents being available from the website is welcomed

Families need to be able to visit individual school campuses while weighing up their choices, just as they can for their other children, including those with support classes, and schools for specific purposes. We are aware that some families have been told that they cannot visit some schools. Other families are not expected to enrol their children at schools they cannot visit. Families of children with Down syndrome commonly feel that it is ***more*** important that they visit schools prior to enrolment, not ***less*** important, given their children's additional vulnerabilities and needs.

The Department of Education and Training must develop policies and procedures that reconcile the apparently perceived conflicts of interests between families considering enrolment, and the privacy of students already enrolled in support classes and schools for specific purposes. We are also aware that family visits prior to enrolment are not considered a difficulty at all schools, so they should not be difficult to accommodate at any school.

A families' decision about enrolment should be respected by school and departmental personnel, even if they disagree with the decision. All students are entitled in NSW to be enrolled in mainstream classes, and those who qualify for enrolment in support classes or schools for specific purposes are entitled to be enrolled in them. Families do not make enrolment decisions lightly and can generally be assumed to be acting in their child's best interests as their knowledge, experience and values guide them. Additional pressure from others, including professionals, does not help to smooth the transition into new educational settings and stages, but adds stress. Families are now generally well informed about the range of views amongst both families and professionals about inclusive and segregated educational settings, and do not welcome the judgement of their individual decisions by those with differing views.

Requirements for assessment of students needs should be clearer. The assessment process can be quite distressing for families, and many doubt the usefulness of some of the assessments used (particularly IQ testing) and the need for repeated assessment. We are aware that some students are assessed much more frequently than is advised by the experts in assessment, and more frequently than is required by the Department of Education and Training's own guidelines.

> One child who was assessed as having a 'mild' intellectual disability, and therefore did not qualify for individual support funding, was for a period subjected to IQ testing at six and twelve month intervals, against the DET guidelines, from Year 2 to Year 4, at the insistence of DET personnel. While these assessments were done for the purpose of providing funding as a 'special consideration', they should not have been required except at the time of a change in educational setting. She will no doubt be required to be assessed yet again as she prepares for transition to secondary school. Her enrolment and support should not have been in question at any time before then. Each year (and sometimes each six months) was treated as a potential threshold for transition.
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> This child's parents were advised on a number of occasions by DET personnel that she 'should' be moved to an IM class at a neighbouring school some distance from her home school, when that class did not in fact, exist. Her family has felt as though they were in a transition period for most of her primary school years.

'Partial', 'part-time' and 'dual' enrolments are sometimes suggested as means of 'easing' a child (or perhaps the school?) into the enrolment of a student with Down syndrome. Evidence tells us that these arrangements frequently do not produce the desired outcomes, and should not be recommended. A child who already struggles with learning will not learn more easily by being in the educational environment for less time than other students, or by having to manage two or more different school environments. Shorter visits to gain some familiarity with the new environment can be supported by visual tools such as social stories, images and video, before the enrolment is started.

Students and families need to have adequate time to make informed choices and to prepare for transitions

It takes time to weigh up choices, to visit schools under consideration, and to gather additional information and resources about matters such as funding, support, and transport.

We are aware of families not knowing where their child will be enrolled before the beginning of Term 1 for a school year, because the bureaucracy has not provided them with information about decisions and/or appeals processes. Such late notifications are simply unacceptable, and would not be considered adequate for students without disabilities. Late notification is disrespectful of the student and the family, and of the school.

Practical considerations about the preparation for any child who is beginning school, changing schools or moving to a new stage of their education, such as uniforms and transport arrangements need to be considered, and family arrangements such as out-of-school-hours care, and parents' work arrangements that need to be made around early notifications. Siblings' enrolments might need to arranged to accommodate the enrolment of the child with Down syndrome.

It is self-evident that transition plans made with the school are not possible if notifications are too late for them to be implemented.

Sometimes, parents are discouraged from making plans 'too early'.

> It was reported to us this week that the family of a Year 5 student with Down syndrome was rebuffed by a special education teacher at a neighbourhood high school in Sydney when they approached her to begin the process of gathering information about transition to secondary school for their child. The teacher told a colleague (also the parent of a son with Down syndrome) that she had sent them away to come back ***this time next year***, because it was "much too early to think about high school". We wonder when she would begin 'thinking about high school' for her own children.

Transitions out of school, either to post-school activities or programs or into further education or work also require adequate time and preparation. It is our impression that most schools do a good job of informing both students and families of post-school options, with the support of regional liaison teachers the National Disability Coordination Officer Program, and of supporting them to make choices and set the required processes in motion. However, from time to time we hear from families who have been given no information at all, who feel anxious and at a loss to know where to start.

> One such family contacted us as recently as June this year. The young man with Down syndrome was in Year 12, enrolled in a support class (IO) and neither he nor his family had been given any indication of what was available after Year 12, or how to find out. The family lived in a regional area of NSW, but certainly not isolated. The mother was told by the school that it was not their job to ‘look after’ her son after he finished school.

Such lack of support for this crucial transition period is simply unacceptable and unnecessary, and amounts to negligence by the school.

Another aspect of post-school transitioning that causes distress to students and families unnecessarily is the timing of exits from Year 12. Students can be left with up to five months’ gap between the send of Year 12 and the beginning of a post-school program, where they are no-one’s responsibility except their families’.

As mainstream students in Year 12 finish school in September/October in preparation for taking High School Certificate exams, a small (but growing) number of students with Down syndrome find themselves without a school program eight-ten weeks before the usual end of a school year. NSW post-school programs most commonly used as the next source of day-to-day support and learning do not start until February-March of the next year, so these students can be left without adequate social and/or learning support for unacceptably long periods. Most families cannot alter work arrangements to accommodate such a long break, and there is a dearth of community programs or other options available for the interim period. Students with Down syndrome often lack the skills necessary to make their own social arrangements, or to be safe without supervision. For some families, the break is so long that it compounds into two periods of transition rather than one.

Students with Down syndrome are currently most commonly enrolled in support classes and schools for specific purposes by Year 12. To our knowledge, SSPs do not require Year 12 students to leave before the designated end of the school year. However, it has been reported a number of times that Year 12 students enrolled in support classes have been told that their program ends when other Year 12 programs end in September/October, and these are the students who can be left adrift for up to five months. There is no justification for support classes to require that Year 12 students leave early. With a little creative planning, both mainstream schools and support classes could provide adequate support and learning experiences for Year 12 students with Down syndrome and other disabilities until the official end of the school year.

The long gap between the end of Year 12 (whenever it occurs) and the start of a post-school program does not appear to be anyone's responsibility other than families'. There is an opportunity for schools and/or other organizations to provide a program or loose structure similar to a 'summer school', with a wide range of activity options, to help students with Down syndrome to navigate this potentially difficult transition period with greater ease. Activities could be any mix of leisure, recreation or learning agreed to by students and their families. Such programs offered in several locations could provide valuable employment opportunities for support workers, volunteers, or tertiary students, and could make use of facilities such as school or community premises that are otherwise unused during the summer. With the imminent implementation of self-directed and/or self-managed funding in NSW, such a concept could have found its time.

Families need to be assured that support will continue to be adequate, as educational settings change.

Families who are accustomed to an adequate level of support for their child at primary school need to know that the same level of support will be available at secondary school, for example. Some students will need additional support at secondary school, given the more complex nature of a secondary school day. For some students, additional support might be needed initially, and can then be reduced as the student becomes accustomed to his new environment.

As students progress through the school years, there is often an unwarranted assumption that their need for support will reduce as they mature and develop, whereas the reality is much more likely to be that the nature of the support required for them to continue to learn and develop, and to be safe will change in nature but might not decrease. Some students are assessed erroneously as having 'done well' with supports, so the supports are removed – it would make much more sense to recognize that the student is doing well *because* the support is *appropriate* and to assess the continuing need for support. It is unrealistic to expect students with Down syndrome to 'grow out' of their disability. The tendency is for major shifts in supports to be changed when transitions between educational settings occurs, especially between primary and secondary school. Such changes are likely to reflect a notion of what is 'available' or 'usual' in the new setting, rather than what the students needs. Some students move into secondary school with either little change in their supports, or with increased support, but some encounter major disruptions to supports that will make the transition more difficult, longer and less successful than it could be for all concerned.

This example, reported to us only two weeks ago, is all too familiar. It reflects a fundamental lack of knowledge of the 'syndromic' nature of Down syndrome, its impacts on learning and communication, the seriously augmented disability experienced by a student with unmet need for significant communication support, and frank lack of accountability for the student's welfare in a new and more complex environment. The anxiety caused to the family does not appear to have been considered, or has been dismissed.

> Our 12 year old son has Down Syndrome and is also has a moderate to severe hearing loss. He is non verbal and heavily relies on AUSLAN signing as his main form of communication.
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> We are currently preparing him for transition to high school next year (2012). He has been enrolled in a support class (IO) since kindergarten. His hearing loss has continued to decrease since Yr3 when he first received hearing aids and received itinerant hearing support.
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> His primary school teachers have been outstanding in supporting his learning of signs and integrating signing into the whole class curriculum. He has also benefited greatly from the school allowing him to integrate into main stream sporting events, including making it to State level in swimming and basketball gala days. We

personally have always accompanied him on any away from school mainstream activities with his teachers.

We had previously assessed our high school options and found the best learning possibility for him would be a hearing support unit within a mainstream high school. Our second option was an SSP school, as his desperate need to increase his AUSLAN signing and communication skills was deemed his greatest priority. However, due to lack of places, the Department of Education and Training has only offered him a position in an IO class in a local high school, **where nobody in the school signs or would have any appropriate means of communicating with him.**

While he will still continue to receive minimal Itinerant hearing support of up to 5 hours a week, this raises many concerns about his welfare, safety and well being at a school of 1,000 students the other 25+ hours a week he is expected to be at school.

These concerns include:

Education: Ability to access basic learning and life skills within the curriculum, ability to communicate and meet expectations of mainstream teachers

His welfare: Based on not having communication partners within the school or the ability to create effective friendships or social interactions.

Safety: Within mainstream subjects including but not limited to, PDHPE, cooking, woodwork, (TAS) and sciences. Also safety issues within the large playground area when trying to interact with mainstream children or dealing with bullying.

Equity: His equal opportunity or lack of access to basic student rights.

Initial concerns have been raised by his current teachers, hearing support staff and also the teachers of the high school of the lack of ability to meet these initial concerns which has lead to inquiries that the high school should be able to apply for a full time interpreter for him as a position in a hearing support class is not available. However, we have been told that he is not eligible for any further funding or support, as he is in a support unit and therefore fully funded/supported. When **clearly this is not the case** and while his primary diagnosis is intellectual impairment, his additional/secondary diagnosis of hearing Impairment will have the greatest impact on his ability to learn if it is not addressed, which in basic terms is discrimination.

Who will keep this student safe? If a place is not currently available in the most appropriate environment (a hearing support class), then it is the Department of Education and Training's legal responsibility to increase the number of places. The only alternative for the family at the moment appears to be to take legal action to force the DET to meet its responsibility to this student, whose needs are complex and unusual. However, he is not the only student with Down syndrome and significant hearing impairment whose needs the DET has failed to even document correctly, let alone made an adequate attempt to meet. Would the department sanction the deliberate denial of communication to any other student? Anticipation of such difficulties proves very stressful for families at every transition period.

In some cases, the provision of special transport by the Department of Education and Training being used as both an inducement and a threat have been reported to us over the years, and we continue to hear such reports from families from time to time. Any such occurrences are unacceptable, but families often feel intimidated and will not report them to the department for fear of losing either transport, or a desired enrolment, or both. Some families (and only some) are required to provide great detail about why they cannot provide transport for their children, and some parents have even reported that DET personnel have offered unwarranted and intrusive advice about how a family should operate to accommodate transport requirements. These circumstances usually occur at transition points between educational settings, in an attempt to persuade families to agree to enrolments that are not their first choice.

Other families report that principals arrange special transport without any difficulty, or intrusion upon the family. Clearly this is inequitable and some families are being disadvantaged.

We still hear occasionally, from families who have been told by professionals (usually long term special education teachers who have failed to keep abreast of research and the experience of others) that the development of students with Down syndrome will ‘plateau’ (a euphemism for ‘stop’), usually during the secondary years, and conveniently at the time the professional has decided to stop providing appropriate learning opportunities, such as literacy activities. After a positive and productive primary school experience, it is shocking and unacceptable that students and their families should ever be confronted by such ignorance at secondary level.

> One secondary school, with a large support unit consisting of a range of support class types was recently unprepared for its student’s families to attend their orientation evening. The support classrooms were locked, and the staff unavailable, even though the families had notified the principal of their intention to attend. They were reluctantly shown the almost bare classrooms, and came away with grave concerns for their children’s enrolment in a setting that was so unwelcoming to families.

Other families have reported that at each transition point, which can include from year to year within the same school, there is little or no communication between one years’ teacher and the next, so that relevant information about the student and his achievements and needs is not passed on. Other teachers do not even ask for previous information and begin teaching material that student has already mastered, delaying their progress unnecessarily. It is hardly credible that such unprofessional practices should persist, but every year we receive a number of calls early in term 1 from teachers who have no information from previous teachers, either because it was not offered, or because they have not asked for it.

For some families, the difficulty of each or any transition can be amplified by the experience of 'revisiting' the child's diagnosis with Down syndrome, and the process of coming to terms with difference

This phenomenon is reported by some families. It is not intentional, nor is it indulgent. It is a normal psychological process, triggered by the need to confront difference again, through repeated assessment, and sometimes by repeated requests to 'prove' that the child does indeed have additional needs (or even that the child still has Down syndrome), and the disability has not yet 'improved' or been cured.

It is not an indication that parents are in 'denial' about their child's abilities, impairments or diagnosis. It is not helpful for education professionals to offer unasked for opinions to families about whether they are 'accepting' of their child's diagnosis, nor do they need to be reminded that the child has Down syndrome.

Most families will recognise such reactions as temporary, and have developed coping mechanisms that will help them to resolve any distress as the transition proceeds – the resolution will be very much helped by a well planned, well executed transition period for the child.

Neither is a parent having expectations of their child's continued learning and development unrealistic. The evidence is clear that people with Down syndrome continue to learn throughout their lives, in every domain of learning.

Transitions are a natural time to re-assess how a child's education might progress over the next stage, and to propose strategies to support them.

Families are a valuable source of expertise and information about their individual child, and about the impacts of Down syndrome in general, during transitional periods

Parents know their children well. A child with a disability like Down syndrome, diagnosed at birth, will have been under close parental scrutiny all his life, both to look for difficulties and to recognise progress. Parents know how their child adapt to change, from daily observations and accommodation. Education professionals need to listen respectfully to parents' expertise and to act upon it.

One example that arises regularly is choosing an appropriate starting date for children with Down syndrome entering school, which dictates the timing of the transition process Parents are routinely told that if their child's birthday is late in the year, and they seek a dispensation from the provisions of the Education Act requiring enrolment by 6 years of age, the Department of Education and Training will deny the application, no matter what arguments the parents might raise, or how good their case. Most parents are practical strategists and do not seek such a dispensation – and the wheels of inflexible bureaucracy turn slowly enough that the child is enrolled in school the following year and no action is taken. From time to time a DET officer (rarely a school based professional) will harass a family to comply with the letter of the Act, no matter how impractical it is.

> This week, one of our members was phoned by such a DET employee who demanded that her daughter who turns 6 on 25th August enrol her in kindergarten on that date. The mother had already negotiated an enrolment at the beginning of the 2012 school year with the principal, who agreed that it would suit the child, the family and the school best. The family and school have a well thought out and agreed upon transition plan in place for the child.

The bureaucracy, (the Special Education Unit within the Department of Education and Training) or the individual bureaucrat in this case needs to be required to act in the interests of the child, the family and the school, by whatever authority is available.

Similar reports are heard from time to time about DET staff insisting that a child must transition to secondary school in the year that they turn thirteen, no matter what circumstances might require greater flexibility. Our attempts to procure copies of the policy and or law that says so have been unsuccessful.

> One family living in a rural area was bullied at several levels (but not by their local school) in attempts to have them transition their child with Down syndrome and very significant and complex health needs, to a secondary school an hour away from her home, when the local school was more than willing to include her and meet her needs well into adolescence. A community and media campaign resulted in her being 'allowed' to stay at her local school, within easy reach of her parents who could be on site in five minutes if a life-threatening episode occurred as it sometimes did. Sadly, the child died some months after the matter was resolved. The harassment of her family by the

> Department of Education over this unnecessary transition proposal was a very unfortunate experience during the last months of her life.

These are examples of bureaucratic bullying. If the Minister needs to step in to issue an appropriate directive, so be it, but they would be far better avoided.

However, such situations arise often enough that some principles need to be developed by the Department of Education and Training in consultation with school principals and with parents to provide appropriate flexibility for those cases where it is not in the best interests of a child with Down syndrome to enrol in kindergarten until the year they turn seven, or to transition to high school after the year they turn 13. Parents (and schools) should not feel that have to hide from the department. Nor be fearful that they will be harassed or bullied.

These are somewhat extreme cases of the expertise of parents being ignored and worse, impacting negatively on transitions in education. More commonly, parents report that their knowledge of their child and of Down syndrome more generally is not acknowledged, is not acted upon, and is sometimes disparaged by education professionals who believe because they have taught students with Down syndrome in the past, that they know everything they need to teach anyone with Down syndrome, even if they have not met them.

Teachers need to be able to plan for smooth transitions, and to have time to implement their plans

Untimely decisions and notifications of enrolments by both the Department of Education and Training and by families impedes smooth transitioning. In our experience families are much better at timely planning than the department, and once departmental decisions have been notified, schools and families work well together.

However, some schools (and individual teachers) are not prepared to put in ground work for the coming year, as they wind down from the current year. Of course the end of a school year is busy, but the culture of “next year’s problem” is short sighted and unprofessional. A way needs to be found for all schools to be able to give some time to transition planning and practice.

At the beginning of the school year, the teacher who is transitioning the student could often benefit from more support (perhaps learning support officer hours, for example) in the early weeks, re-allocated from later in the year, in order to support the child’s transition. It does seem at times that support hours are organised for the convenience of the learning support officer rather than when the child actually would benefit most. Support resources should be sufficiently flexible to be more available during transition periods when they are more likely to be needed.

Teachers need information and professional development education to meet the educational needs of students with Down syndrome adequately

Down Syndrome NSW provides a program of professional in-service education for teachers and other school personnel each year that is well-attended, and provides very positive feed-back. It is based on the specific impacts of Down syndrome and the likely learning needs of students with Down syndrome in school environments. The content is designed to give educators additional information, including access to a wide range of excellent resources about Down syndrome that will allow them to apply their existing knowledge about learning and teaching, in any situation with a student with Down syndrome.

Down Syndrome NSW would be prepared to work with the Department of Education and Training to provide professional education to more school personnel. The online professional education currently being trialled by the department includes no information about the specific learning needs of students with Down syndrome to our knowledge, and the teachers who participate in our programs are always surprised at how wide ranging the effects of Down syndrome are, and how it can effect every area of daily life.

In NSW, inclusion of students with disabilities such as Down syndrome in regular classes is still a recent-enough phenomenon that many teachers have little or no experience in including a student with Down syndrome in their classroom on a full-time basis. They need to know that professional education is available and accessible, and that they will be given the time to participate in it, at an appropriate time during the transition period.

Down Syndrome NSW times its professional education program for school personnel for early in Term 1, when teachers know which students they have in their class, have had some time to assess their strengths and needs, and still has plenty of time to incorporate the information into their daily practice.

Some teachers still ask for ‘***The*** Down Syndrome Program’ as though one instructional package could meet the needs of all children with Down syndrome. That concept needs to disappear from professional thinking.

One group of education professionals who concern us are those teachers who have been teaching students with Down syndrome for many years, and who have not updated their knowledge in decades. They assume that they are experts because they are experienced, but many of them are out of date and compound disadvantage for their students on a daily basis. They are not accessing methods and resources that enhance the learning of students with Down syndrome, and that would make their own professional lives easier and more rewarding. A requirement for teachers to show current/recent professional education about the students they are teaching might go some way into bringing them up-to-date. If such teachers pay any attention to transition planning and practice at all, they are likely to base their response on what they have done for past students, without due attention to the individual needs of each new student. A ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach, or thinking about ‘the student with Down syndrome' as a stereotype does not work well in any aspect of education, including transitions.

Many, many fine information resources designed specifically for teachers of students with Down syndrome have been developed, and are readily available. Down Syndrome NSW is pleased to be able to assist schools in locating those resources, and schools are usually very pleased to find them.

NSW is fortunate to have the Jill Sherlock Memorial Learning Assistance Library, located at Oatlands Public School, available to all schools across the State. The library's collection is comprehensive, current and easily accessible. And it is one of the best-kept secrets in education in NSW. We have spoken with hundreds of teachers over the years we have been providing professional education, and even now a large minority of teachers is aware of the Jill Sherlock library, and that it belongs to them through the department. The Department of Education and Training must tell its own classroom staff that this wonderful facility exists, and encourage them to use it. A campaign targeted at teacher librarians and classroom teachers would be appropriate. Particular attention should be paid to passing the libraries details on to teachers who are transitioning students with disabilities, especially if it is their first experience of doing so, so that they will know where to look for the resources they might need, and can be confident that they will get them.

Transition plans for the playground and other areas outside of the classroom are necessary

A great deal of attention is paid to settling a student into a new class, or a new school – almost exclusively on adaptations and accommodations in the classroom and to curriculum matters. At the same time, much less attention is usually paid to the environment in which the student will find himself outside of the classroom, for significant period of each day. Movement between the classroom and playground, and between classes are micro-transitions, occurring several times a day.

The overall transition planning for any student with Down syndrome must include the classroom, the playground and getting to and from school. It cannot be assumed that students with Down syndrome will 'just know' what to do outside of the classroom, or that they will learn how to manage without support, or that they will be safe without support. Initial orientation to a new school must include the whole environment, will need to be detailed, and visual tools should be incorporated to support the student's transition.

Transitions in education only proceed smoothly with adequate and timely communication between families, school and the Department of Education and Training

Families often find it difficult to communicate with regional personnel who are involved with decision making about a child's enrolment and/or entitlement to individually funded support. There appears to be a lack of administrative support for personnel who work across schools, and have large (sometimes unmanageable) caseloads. Parents wait weeks for information, for appointments, for notifications –and sometimes they receive no communication (see p 8). Families have the prime responsibility for preparing their child for a new school, or a new stage in education, and it is self-evident that they will be hampered by late or non-existent information.

Meetings must be scheduled at times that parents can get to them, with adequate notice. Families have a right to the courtesy of notice of changes in meeting times, and notification of an agenda, who will be present, and a record of the meeting, with actions that will be taken, by whom and the timeframes in which actions will occur. Better use of current communications technology could enhance families' experience of communication about and during transitions. Information about transitions should not be provided on an ad hoc basis at the school gate.

Acceptable methods of communication between home and school need to be established in advance, including how often such communications are expected and manageable from both parties. It is reasonable for families to expect more communication during a transition period, and for it to taper off as the student settles in to his new environment. It is reasonable for families to expect that communication, particularly during periods of change should include notification of what is going well, not only what problems arise. It is reasonable that families provide information about a student's activities and interests at home, to support the teacher's efforts to support a successful transition for the student.

We reiterate that many families report well managed transitions at all stages of education, demonstrating that a smooth transition is a reasonable and desirable goal, that the education 'system' has the capacity to provide. The problems that have been highlighted are solveable, to everyone's benefit and we look forward to this Inquiry's recommendations to promote smooth educational transitions for every student with Down syndrome.