

INQUIRY INTO THE PROVISION OF EDUCATION TO STUDENTS WITH A DISABILITY OR SPECIAL NEEDS

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NSW Primary Principals' Association

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Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs

Introduction

The NSW Primary Principals' Association (NSWPPA) is a professional association for Primary Principals of Public Schools throughout New South Wales with a membership of over 1800 Principals.

This submission is a collation of responses provided by the NSWPPA and as such represents the views, concerns and opinions of Primary Principals across the state.

The paper contains facts, opinions, experiences, arguments and recommendations.

This submission has the authorisation of Mr. Geoff Scott, President of the NSWPPA

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Terms of Reference One:

The nature, level and adequacy of funding for the education of children with a disability

KEY ISSUES

The number of students with mental health issues, presenting for enrolment at NSW Primary Schools is increasing. These students can be very difficult to support with both their learning and behavioural needs. The level of funding available for these students is very limited.

State Integration Funding is available for students with a disability in mainstream classes, however most students do not fit into the profile levels as their disabilities are varied and quite complex. As a result, their allocated funding is insufficient. Reform is needed in the area of Special Education. It should:

- Increase overall areas of funding
- Provide certainty about levels of support
- Provide funds to build school systems, support teachers, resource programs all of which will benefit students with disabilities.

Students with a disability whose parents have little formal education, perhaps a disability themselves, or lack of skills and knowledge as to how to get the best for their child have, in general, a much lower level of funding support. This can also significantly delay the diagnosis of a disability, especially in rural and remote areas where access to doctors and paediatricians is difficult.

Funding issues for children placed in mainstream classes centre on the demands placed on school staff to manage the application process. This process is demanding and complex and requires contact with parents, treating doctors and other health professionals, counselling staff, teaching staff and Department of Education and Training (DET) staff, as its starting point. The demands of the process have resulted in the level and adequacy of funding often being less than required due to the failure of one or more of the parties participating in the process.

There are limited categories of disability that attract funding and where a child has a number of disabilities the combined impact of these is not taken in to account. They only receive funding for the 'primary' disability. The descriptors in the DET handbook for the levels of disability do not allow for enough scope when applying for funding and often do not accurately describe the child.

Funding should meet identified needs and be inclusive of all the support needed to be successful. Funding should include training for teachers and School Learning Support Officers (SLSO – formerly Teachers' Aides), lesson preparation and delivery, time to work with parents, purchase of recommended specialist equipment and regular support from itinerant support teachers.

COMMENTS FROM PRINCIPALS

- *"Delays in funding for students who are unable to gain a disability confirmation is also an issue. I have a student entering year 2 this year with his first funding support. He enrolled in Kindergarten. He clearly has a disability, but it is believed to be a genetic disability, which his geneticist doctor explains, hasn't been discovered yet. Therefore it has no label. He is intellectually disabled, dysmorphic, has a heart condition, a form of epilepsy, serious learning delays and poor social and hygiene skills. We have followed all procedures for securing funding since before he came to school and yet it has still taken two years to get any funding support".*
- *"I have several autistic students, one in particular has been very needy and would benefit having an aide full time, however we have not had enough funds, only two days per week to assist him. Student has had many aggressive outbursts. Two of these occasions I have had to call police and an ambulance and have him*

transported to hospital. He was very physical towards staff, students and parents. I have sent staff to a non-violent restraint handling intervention course”.

- *“Hearing classes attract a small amount of additional funding to the mainstream classes but the amount is not significant enough to fully cater to the specific learning needs of these students”.*
- *“The education of these students is often subject to the ‘political’ issues at the time e.g. the funding for the continuation of hearing support classes. The language class was under a cloud as a result of the discussion into the funding of the learning assistance program”.*
- *“Itinerant Support Teacher – Behaviour (ISTB) assistance can take up to a term to organise and then it may be for one hour per week”.*
- *“Support class funding is allocated solely on students’ disabilities and does not consider students’ functioning capacity - 10 students to 1 teacher and 1 SLSO can be insufficient. Transition funding is not adequate. Students on the Autism Spectrum require more support than they attract”.*

Terms of Reference Two

Best practice approaches in determining the allocation of funding to children with a disability, particularly whether allocation should be focused on a student’s functioning capacity rather than their disability.

KEY ISSUES

The ‘one size fits all’ formula is inadequate. The functioning capacity of students with the same diagnosis can be extremely varied. Best practice approach needs to look at functioning as well as disability

Students with a disability place diverse demands on a school. Descriptions of individual students in terms of typical ‘categories of disability’ – Intellectual, Physical, Vision, Hearing, Autism Spectrum Disorders, Language, Mental Health and Chronic Medical Condition - cannot convey the exceptional nature of each student and their needs. Children who share the same diagnostic category may be very different. Many students who experience difficulties in learning do not quite ‘fit’ under any particular disability category, yet, because of a combination of social, educational, behavioural and/or other reasons, they need additional educational support. There needs to be a fairer and equitable way of allocating funding for all students with disabilities.

There is the problem of co-morbidity, where a child has a number of disabilities but the combined impact of these is not taken into account. They only receive funding for the ‘primary’ disability. Focussing on functioning capacity rather than a blanket diagnosis makes a lot of sense.

Often the parent, psychologist, or specialist will not ‘label’ a child with a disability and therefore the child receives little or no funding, yet has severe challenges in functioning in a normal classroom. This relates especially to students with a mental health issue.

Disability is not an effective indicator of the impact upon classroom learning. Current allocations are not indicative of the needs of students

COMMENTS FROM PRINCIPALS

- *“Funding at our school is based on testing, however we are only allocated 4 support teacher learning (STLA) days a year, so all that time is taken in testing, then we get no help, after chasing all year, regardless of what the testing says. So a different approach to determine children’s needs is needed.”*

- *"We are unable to apply for additional funding for students in the hearing classes with severe emotional disorders because they are in a support class. However, this class is a hearing class not a class for emotional disorders".*
- *"I support the determination of the allocation of funding for students with a disability based on their functioning capacity rather than their disability. So often we require support for students who have no formal diagnosis and in small schools with small budgets it is extremely difficult to provide the support that allows these students to function successfully."*
- *"The identification of a disability should allow students to access support. The level of that support should be based on the individual student's functioning, as assessed by the school, including the class teacher/s and school learning support officers, counsellor/s, medical opinion, itinerant support teacher advice and parental opinion. It should be subject to regular, but not exhaustive, review".*
- *"One size doesn't fit all – disabilities are not discrete and the impact certain students have on classes on a regular basis also needs to be considered. I have been associated with three students with MHI disability confirmation sign-offs and the differences in functioning capacity were almost at opposite ends of the spectrum".*
- *"If a child has a medical disability like spina bifida they should not need to update the disability confirmation - all this does is put pressure on doctors to write up paperwork for DET and puts parents under unnecessary pressure to do hospital and doctor visits within DET timeframes - very difficult for isolated and many rural communities."*
- *"Funding should be allocated to each school to allow a teacher's aide in each classroom. An aide will be able to work with the teacher to deliver Individual Educational Programs (IEPs)s to students. Their functioning capacity should be the focus rather than their disability."*

Terms of Reference Three

The level and adequacy of current special education places within the education system

KEY ISSUES

Demand far outweighs available places. The need is ever increasing but the places are ever decreasing along with decreasing access to appropriate levels of funding.

Many parents, while continuing to struggle for the best outcomes for their child with a disability, do not prefer special education places. For many, there is a belief that their child will receive a better education and opportunity in a mainstream school setting.

There are insufficient special education places within the current system. Currently there are insufficient places for students transferring from support classes in Primary Schools to a High School setting.

COMMENTS FROM PRINCIPALS

- *"It is those students whose parents or carers want them in mainstream which have the most impact on us."*
- *"Why shouldn't these students and their parents have the peace of mind of knowing what their educational pathway is?"*
- *"There is little doubt in my mind that there is an increasing demand for support classes. This may be due to the fact that there appears to be an increasing number of students with autism which is often not confirmed prior to commencing school."*

- *"There are not enough support units and the statewide policy "one class has to close to open another" is so frustrating as once again the impact is on the neighbourhood school..... I feel if the functioning capacity was taken into account the number of special education places would be more indicative of reality."*
- *"There are a lot of children who need placement but there are no vacancies. My understanding is that this is especially true for children with emotional and behavioural disturbance."*
- *"Need many more places in particular. These should be based on a model where students are reintegrated after they gain some self control. BUT also operate with the knowledge that some students may never cope in mainstream."*
- *"Growing need for autism and behaviour disorders classes. Current school has 1 Behaviour Disordered (BD) class and only 1 space available in 2010. 8 applications received. These students then go into mainstream and minimal funding (1 hour a day) means schools are dealing with welfare and not curriculum for all students".*
- *"Schools reluctant to take on Emotionally Disturbed (ED) classes because it can be perceived as a dumping ground for everyone else's problems. Inadequate training of staff then compounds the problem. Special Education staff do not have sufficient training in dealing with the needs of the students."*
- *"The processes in place in NSW DET schools are that a special education class elsewhere has to close down before another can be established where there is a need. This puts incredible pressure on mainstream classroom teachers where special education facilities do not exist."*
- *"Without a doubt, we have seen the systematic demise of provision of places for students with disabilities and special education needs. The level and adequacy of current education places within the education system is simply NOT ENOUGH. The NSW DET has done an excellent job of closing down all the classes for students with mild intellectual delays (IM classes). This has increased the work load of:*
 - *mainstream class teachers in differentiating the curriculum and has made it increasingly difficult for them to meet the ever-growing range of learning needs of students in their classes;*
 - *school learning support teams which struggle to divvy up the ever-diminishing STLA allocations given to schools;*
 - *school counsellors – increasingly assessing and supporting teachers in classrooms with ideas and strategies to assist students;*
 - *school executive who spend hours of time endeavouring to maximise the diminishing array of services that should be provided for students with learning difficulties and mild intellectual delays."*

Terms of Reference Four

The adequacy of integrated support services for children with a disability in mainstream settings, such as school classrooms

KEY ISSUES

Students with disabilities in mainstream classes are disadvantaged due to lack of resources and funding. Students are having difficulty accessing the curriculum due to limited funding. There is also a lack of therapy-based resources for these students as there are always huge waiting lists and lack of experienced and qualified professionals.

The time allocated to students from itinerant services is minimal and rarely results in measurable student outcomes. Interventions for many students require longer periods of support to sustain change. The level of professional expertise of Itinerant Teachers varies hugely. Many do not have the skills to work in more complex disability settings.

Current systems of support are built on form-filling and lengthy time delays.

COMMENTS FROM PRINCIPALS

- *"The interesting and most significant fact with the trial School Learning Support Program (SLSP) proposal, is that there will be no increase in the current amount of funding committed to the integrated support services for children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms."*
- *"The student was visited by support services. This however did not prevent the interruptions to other young students' learning on many, many occasions with his outbursts. Other parents were very upset with the interruptions to their child's learning. I am so very lucky to have so many supportive staff to look after this student."*
- *"Access to the itinerant support teachers is difficult to obtain and of limited time and duration."*
- *"While one student with special needs can be supported in a mainstream class with a mainstream teacher, the situation generates a greater degree of difficulty when more than one child is being integrated with often multiple difficulties and challenges."*
- *"Serious consideration needs to be paid to the learning needs of mainstream students in classes where other students are being integrated, especially those with emotional or behavioural disorders."*
- *"The school learning support officers are often not trained and the teachers have had no experience of working with children with some of the complicated and multiple special needs with which they are confronted. Often no assistance is given to teachers to write individual education programs for these students and the itinerant support teacher integration regional support is so thinly spread that you often meet this person only once each year and it is left to the Principal or experienced other staff members to write these programs alone."*
- *"Many children are well supported and the very best outcomes are evidenced. Some students however, have a major impact on their class, its ability to function and the welfare of teachers who day in and day out manage under extremely difficult and unsupported circumstances. (Autistic, total non-compliance, high noise levels and distractions which impact on other students, minimal access to curriculum)."*
- *"Additional pressures are placed on the teachers of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms and in a small PP5 school, this is compounded as the teacher caters for multiple abilities simultaneously. Such situations need to be taken into account if students with learning disabilities are to have equity in the mainstream classroom."*
- *"All classrooms in Australia should have a full-time teachers' aide as there are sometimes up to 4-6 students per 30 who present with learning or behaviour difficulties."*
- *"Visiting support services e.g. Autism Outreach are very good but only present to the school for approximately one hour. They help with developing IEPs for students but it is very difficult for the teacher to deliver this individual program when they have 29 other students to teach. A full-time aide could be trained to deliver this program and would be of assistance to other students in the class as well."*
- *"Integrated support services are inadequate due to limited numbers of positions and full caseloads. Access to IST (itinerant support teachers) Autism and Behaviour is limited and is difficult to organise for consultative visits."*
- *"There is simply not sufficient funding to support the disabled child, teachers and other students in the mainstream setting."*

Terms of Reference Five

The provision of a suitable curriculum for intellectually disabled and conduct disordered students

KEY ISSUES

There have always been quality teaching and learning environments within our school that stimulate student engagement, satisfaction, commitment and learning. Educational experiences have been organised to meet the individual needs and interests of all students with a disability. However, there is a need for a national special education curriculum to be developed so that, in order to achieve success, all students with a disability need time, specific forms of support, carefully structured teaching programmes and in some cases, the use of an alternative means of communication. The majority of students who have learning difficulties require work to be suitably presented and differentiated to match their need. The important common factor is for access to the curriculum to be facilitated by whatever means necessary to ensure that success is achieved.

There is no suitable curriculum that meets the needs of students with severe and moderate intellectual disability. National testing also does not address their learning needs.

Curriculums do not address the learning needs of many students with disabilities and teachers are struggling to continually modify and adjust learning. Whilst the curriculum can be adjusted with allocated time, delivery of programs is often inadequate due to teacher constraints and availability of SLSO support.

COMMENTS FROM PRINCIPALS

- *"Mainstream teachers rarely have the training required to modify curriculums appropriately to cater for the specialised needs of intellectually disabled or conduct disordered students. Mainstream teachers don't have access to adequate training to provide suitable programs for integrated students."*
- *"Currently schools are just struggling to cobble programs together, usually with commercial products which are held in disdain for normal students. Access to support in this area is minimal. It is cruel for these students to continue to receive Es through our reporting to parents, which, if they have an ILP is what happens."*
- *"As good as our teachers are, there is some question as to whether they are adequately prepared or trained to cope with the learning demands of these students."*
- *"All our students have had IEPs written by the individual class teacher, with some assistance from the school's Learning Support Team committee and the school counsellor. Outside agencies can provide limited support. The Regional Behaviour team has been very helpful. Autistic support is fragmented."*
- *"There is no suitable curriculum for either of these types of students; it is left entirely up to the teacher to adapt the curriculum to suit the individual child. The conduct disordered students are the most difficult as they are extremely disruptive and uncooperative and cause many teachers to give up in despair. Where is the district or Regional support?"*
- *"Modified programs take time, effort and expertise to devise and implement."*
- *"These students rely on the knowledge and skills of teachers to provide suitable curriculum. The teachers are often not experts in the field because they have never been formally trained in either behaviour management or the specific needs of the many intellectually disabled students. This leaves the teacher feeling uncertain about his/her capacity to provide a suitable curriculum."*
- *"Curriculum is not an issue as far as I'm concerned. You can modify all curriculums to cater for individual need."*
- *"The standard report format that is usually used is completely unsuitable for these students. It is matched to a curriculum that is beyond what they will be able to achieve."*

- *“Time for writing ILPs (Individual learning plans) and providing specific work plans and programs for aides is not catered for in the mainstream classroom, so this has to be done in the teacher’s own time which is difficult, especially in my school, where we have 4 students with ILPs in one classroom.”*

Terms of Reference Six

Student and family access to professional support and services, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and school counsellors

KEY ISSUES

Student and family access to professional support and services is limited especially, but not only, in rural and remote settings due to lack of professionals, time and funding. They have huge caseloads of clients and often schools do not see therapists and other professionals for weeks at a time. There needs to be a reform on the allocation of professionals to schools, funding and assessment of students. A lot of students are missing out on valuable therapy due to a variety of reasons including waiting lists and inappropriate criteria. Families are often very frustrated with this whole process.

These support services are almost non-existent in rural and remote areas where there can be waiting lists for speech support etc of more than 18 months. Often the school year has come and gone before a child is even assessed.

In areas of higher socio-economic advantage parents are forced to seek outside and private therapy at a very high cost. Parents in low socio-economic areas are just forced to wait and the child goes without support.

Counsellor allocations to schools are inadequate across the board.

COMMENTS FROM PRINCIPALS

- *“In our setting, Western NSW, it is a ‘revolving door’ for support services. Staff seem to move on at an alarming rate and we struggle with consistency of support, so vital for these children.”*
- *“Again, because of our location, minimal unless parents are willing to travel at least 50 km if not 160km, which, for regular visits and work commitments, becomes very difficult. Our school counsellor allocation is only 4 days a year.”*
- *“I can cite many examples of having asked parents of students in our mainstream classes to have their child access speech therapy. There are numerous reasons why this does not occur, but cost and long waiting lists are definite issues.”*
- *“The waiting list has blown out to years via Area Health and 6 months for paediatricians. Occupational therapy (OT) is a 4 month wait and speech therapy years. Schools have started employing a speech therapist for assessments and then providing programs to cater for the children.”*
- *“It has been my experience that some schools have independently established working relationships with speech pathologists in their local area.”*
- *“Unfortunately, so much of the school counsellor’s time is taken up with completing paperwork for funding and placement applications etc, they are left with little time to actually counsel the students in need.”*
- *“These support services are not available to our school community. Community health services in the area are stretched to the limit with a 2 year + waiting time for speech therapy and other allied health services.”*

School counsellors are available for 30% of the school year and this is not adequate to serve a student population of 500 students."

- *"If you are in the bush or in an isolated community then this access is extremely limited. Also schools with special education units are disadvantaged as the existing school counsellors spend all their time on DET accountability and the mainstream kids get short change. Also the disability consultants think they have the right to dictate the jobs of School counsellors in such schools to meet DET accountability requirements."*

Terms of Reference Seven

The provision of adequate teacher training, both in terms of pre service and ongoing professional training

KEY ISSUES

All pre-service teachers should undertake compulsory special education training as part of the core component of their degree.

All teachers need to be aware of the range of student disabilities which they may be presented with in a mainstream classroom. They need to be able to differentiate and make adjustments to the curriculum, need to know how to support students who present with learning difficulties, they need to know about the array of support services and technologies that can be accessed and they need to understand and be able to implement strategies to support students with behaviour disorders. They need to develop their own philosophy around special needs education and inclusion. They need training in how to maximise the use of a teachers' aide and work with the parents of students with disabilities.

There are not enough special education qualified teachers. In rural areas most positions usually go to a willing general primary teacher.

On-going professional development is vital in ensuring that teachers and school learning support officers are kept up to date with new data, technology, policies and teaching techniques.

Whilst professional training is available, for many the travel distance is significant, requiring the need for accommodation and travel costs to be factored in. For a 2 day course this could mean up to \$1500 which is a significant amount in a small PP5 school. No additional financial support is provided in these types of circumstances.

SLSOs receive no targeted professional learning funding and current Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) funds do not adequately cover training needs for staff requiring specialist training in complex areas of disability

COMMENTS FROM PRINCIPALS

- *"The pre-service training only vaguely touches on students with a disability and there are so many disabilities that it would be impossible to cover them all."*
- *"There is no adequate ongoing professional development that I know about. Some things are ridiculous, like the 2 day courses that expect a teacher to develop the physical skill and ability to respond physically to students who are violent."*
- *"Most inservice training that has been worthwhile is commercially produced, expensive and run in major cities only."*
- *"There is a growing demand."*
- *"Many courses are run by outside agencies for at a considerable cost."*

- *"Supply of qualified or experienced Special Education teachers does not equal the demand."*
- *"All teachers should have training at university including "hands-on" experience to deal with students with Autism and associated disorders including Asperger's Syndrome."*
- *"Teachers have approx \$500 a year for professional training. This money should be a focus to improve student learning. It is used to pay for training in OH&S, Dealing with Difficult People etc rather than specifically to do with programs that will directly benefit the students."*
- *"Additional Teacher Professional Learning funding to schools with Special Education units may assist in addressing skills and knowledge of mainstream teachers."*
- *"Whilst those teachers going into special education units seem adequately trained, it is the mainstream teachers who have students with disabilities placed in their classes who do it the hardest. They have to do NVC training plus anything else we can "cobble" together for them. In the autism area, whilst there has been an improvement, it is still very hypothetical with little 'reality' of classroom management."*
- *"The training to be offered under the School Learning Support Program (SLSP) proposal may go some way toward assisting but it remains to be seen to whom this training will be made available and whether it will include mainstream teachers."*
- *"Because so many teachers are now coming to teaching at age 30 with an unrelated degree in journalism or hospitality etc. and just doing one year at University to qualify them to teach – they miss out totally on even the basics of how to teach reading, phonics etc. and feel ill-equipped to teach an ordinary primary class, let alone one with several students with varying disabilities."*
- *"On-going training is becoming so expensive that it is difficult to send people. We spent \$4000 of our own school's budget on top of TPL funds and we are a school with only 4 classes."*
- *"Some schools are very good at providing professional training in school hours - but spend many thousands of dollars over the Professional Learning Funds allocated by Global Funds. (I spend at least double what DET provides)."*
- *"This is totally inadequate. It happens in an almost random fashion in response to the arrival of a disabled student in the teacher's class. It is purely reactive and inconsistent."*

Any other related matters

COMMENTS FROM PRINCIPALS

- *"The answer is that more funding, training, provision, resourcing needs to be injected so that the demands of the special education agenda can be adequately met, so that mainstream students do not pay a price, so that students with disabilities do not pay a price, so that the goodwill and dedication of teachers is not milked dry and so that the parents of students with disabilities do not have to fight so hard to get what is for some, but a trickle of support for their child."*
- *"There is a significant occupational health and safety impact on teachers, school learning support officers and principals in regard to working with students with disabilities and their families in a mainstream setting."*
- *"The research now shows that there is also a significant impact on learning for other students, especially in the area of students with emotional or behavioural disability. (Denham – effect size)"*
- *"The new SLSP program looked very promising, as this was going to provide that additional support weekly for us, help us to address multiple needs at the school for which we cannot get support with our current system. Our small school area supported this model and is looking forward to the trial and what it has to offer."*

- *Allocation of School Administrative Support Staff (SASS) etc to schools with Special Education units, based on student enrolments, does not match the demands of additional administration that comes with staff ratios. Principals also pick up a significantly increased work load*
- *Placement panels should include a principal of the same type of classes as those being placed i.e. hearing placement panels should have a principal of a school that has hearing classes, language placement panels should have a principal of a school that has language classes etc. Furthermore, when a student has multiple disabilities or significant issues which may not have had an additional disability confirmation, then the principal of the receiving school should be consulted.*
- *There needs to be a reduction in the class size to compensate teachers who have students with a serious disability. Often no allowance can be made because of the DET staffing formula which is grossly unfair to both the student and their teacher (and the other students in the class).*
- *The DET tries to put the responsibility for these students at the feet of the Learning Support Team in schools. These teams are made up of ordinary classroom teachers with often very little or no experience of students with a disability. They volunteer for this role and are expected to make decisions and help write programs with no support from anyone with experience in the area of disability and all in their own lunchtimes or after school hours.*
- *There has been and continues to be a reduction in Autism Outreach Support. This is essential if classroom teachers are expected to cope with students with varying degrees of Autism in their classes.*
- *We need more DET-run Autism satellite classes in our schools as so many more students are being diagnosed with Aspergers / Autism and the demands on the classroom teacher are ridiculous.*
- *In all our schools, we are trying our best to teach our student,s but this has now become very difficult with the number of children who shouldn't be in mainstream classes causing great disruption to other children's learning and to stress levels of teachers.*
- *I'd like a model where children with a disability count as more than one child when it comes to staffing so that those classes with disabled children in them can have reduced numbers.*
- *Our Support Unit physical environment has just been upgraded so that will make things easier with regards to toileting, hygiene and storage space. However, there is a continuing concern of always having to fight for funding, resources and teacher aiding. The formula used to make up class sizes is unfair and out of date. Students with disabilities usually have multiple needs and the issues are extremely hard to address on a day to day basis without adequate staffing, funding and physical resources."*