

Submission
No 62

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

Name: Name Suppressed
Date received: 10/02/2010

Partially Confidential

8 February 2010

I would like to submit the following information for consideration as part of the inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs.

My information is based on my experiences as a teacher within the NSW public education system since 1979.

My current role is Principal of an SSP for students with moderate or severe intellectual disabilities in a regional centre [omitted at the request of the author]. I have been the Principal at this school for nearly 11 years. There are currently 43 students enrolled at this SSP.

Terms of Reference

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

- Currently in NSW DET schools, there are different processes for determining the level of funding for students with disabilities who are enrolled in mainstream classes and those in special education settings. (The system for funding students with special needs is under review and a new system will be trialled in the Illawarra & South East region in 2010. The introduction of this new system has been very poorly thought through and communicated to staff in my view and is typical, in my view, of the lack of empathy and understanding by the senior staff in the NSW DET Disabilities directorate of the work that is required and done in schools.) Students with disabilities in the mainstream are funded if they have a diagnosed disability or mental health issue. The level of funding is based on a functional assessment of the needs of the students for accessing the curriculum. In special education settings, the primary disability of a student is funded only. For example, a student with a moderate intellectual disability will be in a class of up to 10 students* with one teacher and one school learning support officer. There is no additional support if this student has other disabilities that require assistance eg, physically disabled requiring full assistance for personal care and access to many areas of the curriculum. The rhetoric is that Principals can apply for special consideration to have the student placed in the "severe" category but this requires considerable work and can be, and are, overruled by DET officers.

[omitted at the request of the author]

- A student with a severe intellectual disability is in a class of up to 6 students with one teacher and one school learning support officer. There are many examples of classes where all 6 students have profound physical and medical needs. As the toileting of these students requires 2 people each time, it is difficult to determine how this occurs safely when there are only 2 adults assigned to a class and the other students are entitled to supervision and an education.

- I have also had it said to me by a Disability Programs Consultant that there has been reluctance to assess a student as having a severe intellectual disability when they start school as this does not give them the best chance to succeed. Indeed, I would argue the opposite - they are not treated differently if they are 'tagged' severe; early intervention for increasing outcomes would be enhanced by the increase in staffing.
- Kinder class sizes were reduced in recent years. The numbers of students in support classes was increased!!!
- If you add-up the time taken to change these students at least once per day and to feed them and place them in a stander or out of their wheelchairs for some part of the day, it is significant and leaves little time for these students to have educational programs implemented.
- At this point, I would like to add that the NSWDET senior officers in disabilities will claim that mealtimes and toileting are educational times for these students. Whilst I agree that limited teaching and learning can take place at those times, I argue that this claim is only to save providing adequate funding for these students to participate in a curriculum that meets the requirements of the legislation surrounding the provision of education for students with disabilities. In fact, during an assessment of my school situation only a few years ago, the leader of "access and participation" in the state wrote on a risk assessment that I should consider grouping my students into classes according to their toileting needs!
- The variation in the needs of students classified as moderate, severe or mild are huge. In fact, some students miss out on a "label" but have significant needs and receive no funding under this system. A functional approach to determining needs and subsequent level of funding is required. The OH&S requirements must also be considered for staff in determining adequate and ongoing support.

[omitted at the request of the author]

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- I believe that the procedures required under the joint agreement between DET, PSA and the Nurses Association are unsustainable in SSPs such as the one that I work in where there are many students with gastrostomies and other medical needs. It is difficult to get specific training by a health care professional in rural areas as most of the training and support for families is based in Sydney and in this area, agencies such as community nurses will not provide the training to schools nor will local paediatricians. Nurses from the local hospital are not readily available and in fact, I have been told by the director of nursing at the local hospital that I cannot expect them to provide this training.
- It is my view that the DET should introduce nurses to schools where there are several students with considerable medical needs or across a community of schools. Another option would be to introduce a new position which would be a paraprofessional role that has adequate training and remuneration for performing the health care procedures that are required in schools.
- It is also my view that a position of personal care assistant should be introduced where there are significant numbers of students who are dependent for personal care. This would allow the school learning support officer (teacher aide) to assist with the implementation of educational programs which is the core business of schools.
- In mainstream classes, not only should the child be supported by a school learning support officer but the student should be factored as more than 1.0 in the class allocation. A student with significant needs requires significant accommodations and adjustments to programs which requires significant teacher time and therefore, the time available for other students is necessarily diminished both for face to face teaching and class preparation.

* In SSPs, a moderate intellectual disability is factored as 1.111. However, I became aware of this by chance and I am unaware of whether this has been communicated to

Principals directly. There is also a factor of 1.42 for students enrolled in SSPs since 2008 if they also have a pervasive disorder. Again, the rules around this have changed but I only discovered this by chance. This lack of communication leads to confusion and inconsistency in the levels of staffing for students that is available.

2. 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.

- A number of years ago, a trial of recommendations from the Comino Report were trialled in some schools across the state. It would seem that the approach of funding based on a functional assessment did not achieve the desired outcomes as this program was discontinued. It would have seen a significant betterment to the staffing available for students at my school. It would have also allowed some flexibility in determining whether a school learning support officer or a teacher would be employed to meet the identified needs of students across the school.
- It appears that in the USA, there is more accountability regarding the delivery of an educational program to students. It also seems that as a result of the legislation, there are more services available to students as schools "broker" their students with disabilities to other agencies, professionals. Speech therapists and other therapists can be employed under the arrangements there is my understanding. Not perfect but worth looking into.

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

- I believe that there are waiting lists for special education placements. The workload for support teachers learning in schools is too great and for itinerant teachers to support schools with behaviour are overwhelmed.
- The itinerant teacher model for all disabilities other than sensory are being reviewed. I welcome this as the itinerant model does not work in rural areas where the distances between schools may be great.
- I am concerned about the adequacy of support for students and teachers in classes for emotionally disturbed students. As late as yesterday, I was advised of another class where a teacher with little experience has been placed on such a class. These students and teachers deserve adequate support if these classes are going to be more than just removing a problem from the mainstream. Better outcomes for all should be facilitated by adequate training and support.
- The adequacy of the services relates to the adequacy of the funding. A teacher cannot effectively deliver a quality education when the needs are so great and cannot be met within available resources. The rigidity of allocating funding on a primary disability only is currently denying these students the capacity to deliver an appropriate and equitable education.
- The recent introduction of multicategorical support classes is a welcome move as hopefully, students who have missed out before on a placement because of the eligibility under a specific disability will be placed in a more appropriate setting. However, it is yet to be determined whether this model is effective. I am hopeful!

- I would like to see the notion of a community of schools working cooperatively to provide appropriate educational programs for students investigated as part of the current review. The notion of schools working together to effectively use resources is desirable and being promoted for mainstream students. I think issues such as local context, networking, ownership, professional dialogue, incorporation of outside agencies would achieve better outcomes for students with special needs and disabilities.

4. Adequacy of integrated support services for children with a disability in mainstream settings, such as school classrooms.

- There is no consideration of issues such as the industrial awards that require a school learning support officer to be employed for a minimum of 2 hours per day or the ability to employ suitable staff to assist the student and teacher.
- There is very little training available for school learning support officers. Schools are expected to find and train staff.
- There is no consideration of the occupational health and safety requirements for such things as hoisting students which requires 2 people or lifting smaller students which also requires 2 people.
- My experience is that staff are not generally supported by therapy services for students. Staff are also unaware of avenues for funding for specialist equipment to facilitate access to the curriculum.
- Older teachers tend to be fearful of having students with profound disabilities in their classes. My view is that it is because they are fearful of not doing a good job and their workload is huge. Less experienced teachers generally do not have that same fear factor as there have been some attempts to address preservice training to include a component on special education.
- I would like to see teachers given more specific support with individual programming.
- I believe that a good teacher can teach all students if they are adequately supported. Teachers should not feel deskilled when disability is mentioned. If the physical and medical needs are catered for by persons other than the teacher, then with some intensive initial and very practical support with programming, teachers should be able to provide an effective and appropriate educational program for those students where the consensus is that they are in the most appropriate setting for that stage of their development.

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

- Across the state we are working in isolation to provide a suitable curriculum.
- There is very little specific training for teachers working with these students
- Most consultants do not have any knowledge or skills in this area
- The syllabus documents currently have 3 different formats
- There is little accountability. It seems that if we just keep them and their parents happy, we're seen but not heard, then no-one really cares.

- Students with disabilities are usually forgotten by policy makers. They are add-ons for individual schools to work out how that will look for them.
- The statements for life skills outcomes are very broad. After years of trying to develop rigour for all of my students in their programs, a Board of Studies consultant expressed to teachers that they could cover the requirements for languages other than English by taking them to a Chinese restaurant. I suspect that Mum and Dad might be able to do that and for the many years after school, that could happen.
- My goal is to have "participate" in activities as the way we assess students.
- This is not an easy area but these students and the staff deserve greater direction and support. It is achievable!
- Staff should have access to some of the diagnostic testing and subsequent strategies for students that are available to teachers of non-disabled students eg Best Start and NAPLAN. It would be useful to use those tools, not necessarily at the age for non-disabled peers but as appropriate and to have the support that comes with those now for teachers.
- Students in SSPs are not provided specialist teachers and specialist rooms which reduces the capacity to cover all key learning areas effectively eg, Science, technology and applied science, performing arts, careers , languages other than English.
- There is an anomaly in the staffing of secondary school age students in support classes. In a high school, each support class is staffed by 1.42 teachers. In an SSP, the staffing for those same students is approximately 1.07. Additionally, students in SSPs do not have access to careers advisers, welfare head teachers. The executive staff in SSPs other than large ones are teaching executive with only 2 hours release for preparation of their class programs , etc
- In 2009 all principals in SSPs became non-teaching regardless of size

6. Student and family access to professional support and services such as speech therapists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists and school counsellors.

- The NSWDET do not employ therapists but I wish that they would.
- The access to these services seems to vary across the state. It varies because of local Ageing, Disability and Home Care models in different areas. The availability of other services eg Spastic Centre, is also significantly varied across the state
- These agencies work with clients not schools and it requires good relationships and good communication to get support for students from therapists.
- There are never enough and there are often vacancies for therapy positions for long periods of time in this rural area. This unavailability of this professional support impacts significantly on students, staff and families.
- The school is often used as the most convenient meeting place for parents, therapists, sales representatives. Not always as convenient for the school but we do whatever we can to facilitate the delivery of these essential services.
- A number of students have to wait significant periods of time for wheelchairs when they start school. A major concern on a number of planes and all I can say is why?

- The therapists , particularly, speech therapists work on a consultative model and not a clinical model as they cannot meet the demands. I thank the speech therapists who have and continue to support teachers with their expertise and training.
- I am probably in a unique position whereby I would rather have a school counsellor available when assessment is required but not allocated to the school on a regular basis. The reality is that a counselling service is not required often but are desperately needed in other settings.

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

- My mantra is that a good teacher is what is required for successfully working with students with disabilities. A good teacher who is committed to education for all students will achieve good outcomes for students
- Having said that, I have also changed my view that new teachers should not work in specialised settings as they should consolidate their skills in mainstream classrooms where the feedback from students for self evaluation is often more evident . The recent experience with new scheme teachers is that they are able and confident to teach in this specialised setting and they are doing a brilliant job
- I have completed 2 bachelor degrees and 1 post graduate degree in education. There has been nothing available in those courses for programming for students with severe disabilities and little on behaviour management. I hope that it has changed and it appears that it may have as far as training for management of behaviour.
- There are many inservice courses but again very little that is for working with students with severe intellectual disabilities, particularly those accompanied by physical disabilities. There are lots of courses on autism and behaviour but they usually do not relate to severe autism or severe behaviour where a student does not have the intellectual capacity to utilise behaviour strategies as suggested.
- There is not a lot of realism in the application of strategies to a whole class or whole school situation and the constraints from availability of resourcing , OHS legislation.
- It would be wonderful if we could ease the pressure on schools and teachers by having some resources that can be used "off the shelf" and not require considerable adjustments.

8. Any other related matters

- I hope that education is regarded for all students irrespective of the future ability to "contribute" to society. I believe that people with disabilities do contribute even if they don't earn an income. It is harder to measure the value-added by education for our most vulnerable student. I hope that we stop just ticking boxes to say that we are meeting our obligations to provide an education for students with

disabilities and that these students are valued enough for us to meet our further obligation of providing equitable and quality education for ALL students.