

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

**Organisation:** New South Wales Secondary Principals' Council

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## Submission to the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into transition support for students with additional or complex needs and their families

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### Students' Needs During Transition Periods

#### 1. The adequacy and accessibility of appropriate support for children and their families

It is understood that the transitions of students whose disabilities and/or complex needs require 'extra' support, provide a diverse, complex and unique range of difficulties that can only be addressed adequately on a case-by-case basis. The transition-to-work requirements of students with high physical support needs are currently not being met and this is elaborated in section 3.

Transition is varied and complex. Transition ranges from:

##### ◆ **Mainstream setting to another setting**

In some circumstances this is a straight-forward transfer however there are many times students transfer because of the breakdown at the school they are departing. Usually this is a result of continuous behaviour difficulties.

##### ◆ **Mainstream into a special setting**

Communication and planning, between the sending and receiving schools, must be carefully undertaken to ensure success. Ideally the student (depending on age and other factors), parents/ carers, regional welfare support personnel and non-schools based support personnel must be involved if possible. Special needs, equipment etc. must be put in place prior to the shift.

##### ◆ **Special settings back to mainstream**

Transition in this direction historically creates many problems if adequate support is not available. The receiving school needs to have conditions in place to ensure the best chance of success. This may include integration over time at increasing time intervals.

##### ◆ **School to non-school alternative learning or work environment**

It is recommended that trained support personnel, with whom the student is familiar e.g. their aide, be funded to support the student entering this alternative environment over a significant period of time. Currently students with integration funding lose this funding when they turn 18 or have completed their HSC. To expect success for these students negotiating a new work environment without considerable support is not realistic.

Consistently Principals report that school staff have experienced inadequate resources and inconsistent access to resources to support transition needs of students and their families.

Support for students who fall into existing disability criteria for support programs are usually well catered for in government schools with their needs established at funding review meetings, professional information exchanged, additional transition activities provided and additional support provided by IST, School Therapy Team, autism outreach etc.

However students with additional needs who do not fall into one of the disability categories are not well catered for due to a serious lack of funds and access to support networks. These students may have an undiagnosed learning difficulty and transient anxiety. Any additional transition activities must be organised between primary schools and high schools with a lack of funding and lack of access to support services making this very difficult. Schools need speech therapists, Occupational Therapists, psychologists at school and resources to support families and students.

Families of students with special needs are often unaware of the funding and support available to support their children through the transitions from primary to high school and school to work. Most rely on the support and information provided by the school/unit their child is enrolled at. Most parents are overwhelmed during these transition periods and are often uninformed about accessing services and supporting their child, especially during the transition to work. Parents are often not prepared for their role in helping their children transition to work.

## Support Requirements

### 2. Best practice approaches to ensure seamless and streamlined assistance during transitions

Any transition process must:

- be a collaborative process that involves the parents/caregivers as vital partners especially for students with high support needs;
- address the range of options and not assume all students can be managed and learn effectively in a mainstream environment- the cascade of options needs to be assessed;
- include resources, which are often the main issue in moving from one environment to another e.g. learning support from primary to secondary. Unless adequate support is provided transition to an inclusive setting will not be successful; and
- have a case manager to ensure the transition planning process is effective and all aspects are addressed.

The following requirements are essential to achieve successful transitions.

### Transport

Transport is a massive issue as there seems to be far too many hurdles in place for the student, parent and school. Transport is crucial for students whose age or disability makes travel on public transport unsafe. Transport should be flexible and easily adapted to assist changing needs of the student. Existing transport support is extremely inadequate. There is also a serious lack of transport (e.g. Special Education bus) to transport students to and from events/activities/TAFE/Work Placement during the school day.

Placement of students into a support setting, often in another town, must be accompanied with transport support, which reflects the reality of the situation. The following real case scenario illustrates this.

A student with high level emotional disorder needs is placed in a support unit, which is 40km from the student's hometown. The carer does not have a licence or the financial ability to pay for Taxi fare. Student receives assisted transport but only at designated times of the negotiated attendance plan, which needs to be resubmitted to assisted transport every 5 weeks. Assisted Transport will not pick student up on request as per his risk management plan's exit strategy designed to protect students, staff and to avoid escalation of student's behaviour. Assisted Transport's response was that the carer should pay.

Rural students have additional transport requirements, as often there may be no public transport available.

## **Support and communication**

The movement between sites requires a 'case manager' who has the appropriate expertise to assist the receiving environment. The student and family also need such a support person to address their concerns. Time to communicate effectively with families and staff across all sites is needed.

Increased access to school counselling services is an urgent need in schools. More efficient transfer of counsellor information between schools is needed.

There is an absolute need to include a wide range of groups and individuals in transition planning for individual students e.g. medical professionals (doctors, therapists etc.), Community Services caseworkers and community health workers.

The amount of information on transition, funding and resources is only as good as the ability of the school or an individual at the school to build networks and research services to inform parents during these transition periods. Different schools do different things and there are differing services available in each suburb, which affects accessibility for children and parents. It would be helpful if each region could provide a checklist and a resource list, especially for the transition to work, which would list job placement services, pension and Centrelink information etc.

## **Skill Acquisition**

Students who are transitioned may have specific learning and behaviour challenges. There is also a need to provide training to all staff (teachers and administration staff) prior to the student arrival on student specific issues and needs. The teacher(s) at the receiving school have to be provided with appropriate and adequate training to deal with the student. Failure to do this is abusive to the student, the teacher and the other students in the setting.

Develop scenario type resources to provide guidance for schools and other agencies aiming to support transitions for students with a diverse range of needs.

## **Support resources – transition plans**

Comprehensive and well-planned transitional support is crucial to the success of students with complex or additional needs from primary to secondary school. Not enough resources are given to support this important transition. Intensive transitional planning with the learning support team best provides for the needs of the child. A comprehensive and well-structured transition program is paramount to the smooth success of the transition. If this is not carried out the chances of success for the child are seriously jeopardised. The learning support team has only one chance at the transition. It has to be successful the first time.

Develop an action planning procedure for interagency groups and also a meeting agenda template designed to focus on actions. At times meetings can be more like information swap meets than reflect a strategic and coordinated approach to social dislocation and needs fulfillment.

Funding needs to be at a level that will allow the best practice to occur and the application of funding needs to be more flexible and responsive to the available human resources in a given environment. Currently schools can only use our funding to employ learning support officers - we need to be able to use this to access other support services, especially in rural schools.

Schools also need to develop some expertise (or access expertise) in counseling parents who find the whole process of moving their child into high school and then transitioning into the work force very daunting and become anxious and in some cases difficult and unrealistic in their expectations of what can be achieved.

The fact that funding is removed when a child accesses a support class is also of concern as schools are not able to maintain the individual support that the child is used to in the new setting. There needs to be a recognition that if we are going to be truly inclusive and provide equitable education and opportunities for special needs students then it will cost and cannot be achieved with inadequate resources. Governments need to commit funding to government schools, who carry the heavy load in supporting students with complex needs. This resourcing must not come from cutting other educational programs in government schools.

### **Transition to work and alternative learning environments e.g. TaFE**

More coordinated and specialist support is needed at transition from school to alternative learning or work environments. This support needs to be highly focused at the start and tapering off to continuous less intensive support.

### **Maintenance of Integration Funding**

If a student accessing integration funding is placed for a period of time in an alternate school setting the integration funding ceases and has to be reapplied for when the student returns to the home school. This process is cumbersome and the loss of funding occurs at a critical time hindering appropriate transition support. This transition support is often best provided by the aide employed using the integration funding.

## **3. Any other related matters**

### **Transition Primary to High School**

Historically, transition to high school for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) was supported by an Outreach teacher, due to the complex needs and the amount of time required for a student with Autism to prepare for the high school transition. Over the years, the outreach Autism positions have decreased and most schools are expected to provide this support to parents and children without any extra time or funding to assist.

Students need to be informed by regional placement panels, as early as possible about their high school so transition can take place. This is often not the case. Parents need to work with the school and partake in some of the transition visits with their children. It is also important for a mentor person from the primary school, be it a School Learning Support Officer or a teacher, to attend one transition visit to high school to meet High School staff and share information on the student. This person can also return to primary school and discuss High school with the ASD student to help decrease anxiety.

Often students with ASD are in units in primary school but there are not enough units in high school, so many students with high support needs are being subsequently enrolled in mainstream high school classes. This often sets them up for failure in their transition to high school as their complex needs are not often met in the mainstream high school, especially if they have come from a unit in primary school.

### **Transition High School to Work**

Students often require increased amounts of one to one support during work experience and job placements. More funding is needed for staff in a unit to find placements and support placements as this is often done by the staff in a unit without career teacher's assistance, funding or any extra time given to organise placements.

## **Transition High School to Work – students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)**

Many students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) apply for TVET courses. Some funding is available but it is very minimal and decreasing each year. It is often not enough to support students in their transition from school to TAFE.

Mt Druitt TAFE has developed a model to support students with ASD from school to TAFE. They recognised the number of ASD students enrolling from high school to TAFE, especially since the government increased the leaving age to 17, and have employed a special education contact person who has developed courses specifically for ASD students to participate in before beginning their course. This has led to increased success for ASD student at MT Druitt TAFE. They have also increased the number of discrete course available at TAFE. Unfortunately, other TAFEs in the local area do not provide this service and have decreased the number of discrete course available to students with special needs this year.

Many ASD students have very complex needs but do not qualify for assistance from DAHDC or school to work programs due to the fact many do not have an intellectual disability. However, many have health needs, complex behaviour issues, sensory issues and fine motor issues and dysgraphia and require the assistance that DAHDC and school to work programs can provide, but they are not eligible. This places more stress on the parents during this transition.

Many students with ASD often require supported places of employment but due to their intellectual functioning are often not suited for employment in places such as Sunnyfield and Afford because they do not always present with an intellectual disability. More supported employment places like these specifically for young adults with ASD would be beneficial.

## **Transition High School to Work – students with high physical support needs**

Students in wheel chairs or who use scooters and students who have special medical problems and require special services e.g. toileting, hygiene services experience impossible challenges when seeking placements in school and work environments.

It is an arduous process to get resources to support to these students in mainstream schools e.g. disabled bathroom instead of disabled toilet, an appropriate change table for carrying out the services, a hoist to lift student etc. In workplaces these challenges will also exist and governments need to provide some support.

Another significant stumbling block for students with physical disabilities to access work experience or work exists in the application of OH&S regulations. The presence of a worker in a wheelchair places additional demands on physical space in the workplace. Considering the work experience student does not have the same appeal to an employer as a paid, productive worker it is unreasonable to expect a workplace to supply toilet facilities with a hoist or disabled toilet facilities or special furniture, 'just in case' they have a work experience student with high physical support needs.

This is a highly complex issue, requiring support from all tiers of government. The onus of finding work experience placements for students with disabilities falls largely to parents who are already overtaxed with the demands for additional care of their sons or daughters. Often the whole exercise is abandoned because suitable places cannot be found at the same time to facilitate the necessary teacher supervision.

## **Work Education and Work Experience Provisions for Students with High Physical Support Needs at Sydney Secondary College**

Sydney Secondary College currently has 2 classes of students with high physical support needs at its Balmain Campus (years 7-10) and 2 classes at the Blackwattle Bay Campus (years 11-12). Students in years 9 and 10 have Work Education classes 3 periods per cycle (fortnight). Provision is made, in DEC regulations, for all students in stage 5 (years 9-10) to complete a period of work experience, either a two-week period or one day per week for an extended period.

Students in the Support Unit for Students With Physical Disabilities at Balmain Campus have not been able to find any Work Experience placements for the past 2 years. This year three year 10 students are currently investigating the possibility of completing a Work Experience placement at an Australian Disability Enterprise. This establishment does not have adequate toilet facilities, nor is it fully accessible, but it is the best option, in fact, it is the only option.

The fourth year 10 student has secured work experience of her own but only after many attempts and 'knockbacks'. The issue of wheelchairs and OH&S was the most common reason for rejection. The need for hoists and other special equipment in bathrooms was the next most frequent reason given.

Students in the Unit at Blackwattle Bay have even less success in securing appropriate work experience, usually for very similar reasons. Quite often the only places available for placement are at ADE's designed for people who are cognitively challenged. Often these tasks require fine motor skills that students with physical disabilities find difficult. The nearest ADE that caters specifically for work for people with physical needs is at Botany and it has limited spaces.

### **Finally**

This submission has been compiled from reports provided by Head Teachers, Teachers and Principals of 24 NSW government schools. Thank you for this opportunity to seek better services for students with disabilities and complex needs.