

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

Organisation: NSW Council of Social Service

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The Director,
Standing Committee on Social Issues
Parliament House,
Macquarie Street,
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Director,

RE: Inquiry into transition support for students with additional and/or complex needs and their families.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Standing Committee on Social Issues Inquiry into transition support for students with additional and/or complex needs and their families.

The Council of Social Service of NSW (NCOSS) provides independent and informed policy development, advice and review and plays a key coordination and leadership role for the non government social and community services sector in New South Wales. NCOSS works with our members, the sector, the NSW Government and its departments and other relevant agencies on current, emerging and ongoing social, systemic and operational issues.

NCOSS has a vision for a society where there is social and economic equity, based on co-operation, participation, sustainability and respect.

The NSW Disability Network Forum was established in June 2011 to represent and promote the interests of people with disability and to provide a mechanism to advance common interests amongst a diverse range of non-government, non-provider disability organisations and representatives. NCOSS provides secretariat support to the Forum, as part of new funding from Ageing, Disability and Home Care, Department of Family and Community Services. While still in its formative stages, the Forum considered the Inquiry at its August meeting and several of its members contributed to the NCOSS submission.

NCOSS has also received input from other disability sector contacts. While not extensive, NCOSS believes that this submission represents some of the significant concerns within the sector regarding transition support for students with additional or complex needs and their families.

OVERALL COMMENTS

Several key common issues emerged from the feedback to NCOSS regarding transition supports to students with additional and/or complex needs and their families. These issues pertained across all transition stages for students and their families and were also consistent across different disability levels and types. These were issues that critically affected the success or otherwise of the student as they moved through the education and life stages, and included: accurate, timely and accessible information; person-centred approach and family involvement; and Inclusion and planning.

Accurate, timely and accessible information

Feedback to NCOSS indicated that information could be haphazard and late, and could largely depend on the teacher or provider transferring information either to the next stage provider and/or to the family about the next transition. This also depended on the teacher or provider having the understanding or the time to convey important information to the family on the transition process, what to expect, what choices are available, what questions to ask, what considerations to make etc in advance of the transition. It could also rely on the teacher being obligated to convey important information about the student to the next provider/teacher.

Information on the next stage of a transition must be provided to students and families in plain language, in community languages, in accessible formats, from a central point. Teachers must not be a value-based filter for information to students and families. Teachers must be obliged to convey relevant information in a non-judgmental, encouraging way that enables informed choices and optimal transitions for students. Positive personal stories and having someone from whom to seek advice can also be very reassuring and informative in this process.

Person-centred approach and genuine family involvement

Transition decisions must respond to the best interests of the student at all times and, except in rare circumstances, this will require the genuine participation of the family in education decisions. The Disability sector is increasingly introducing Person-centred practices that put the person with disability at the centre and tailor their supports around them. This will be no less effective in education, especially at critical transition points where change can create anxiety, disruption and important decisions affecting the student's future are in question.

For students with additional or complex needs under the age of 18 it will be necessary to treat the family as equal experts regarding knowledge of the student and their talents and needs, and consequently to engage with the family in determining the best education decisions. This means involvement at planning meetings, with documentation in advance and timely notification of meetings etc, as well as courteous engagement during discussions and respectful consideration of the student's talents and aspirations and the family's goals. NCOSS refers the Social Issues Committee to the Family Advocacy Submission for more detailed information on authentic family involvement and other relevant issues in this regard.

Inclusion and planning

Students with additional and/or complex needs should be offered the opportunity to fully participate in all stages of education and provided with the appropriate supports to do so. The fact that some students have additional or complex needs does not excuse education providers from including these students in all aspects of education offered to other students.

The genuine participation of students with additional needs will require planning and preparation to achieve best outcomes. This takes more time and forethought but should not be considered an extra burden on the system or an inconvenience to staff. NCOSS recommends that transition planning and preparation is considered a valuable investment in the social inclusion and improved economic participation of some of our most marginalised citizens.

Aboriginal Students with disability

NCOSS provides secretariat support to the NSW Aboriginal Community Care Gathering Committee (Gathering Committee) which focuses on community care services to older people and people with disability. The Gathering Committee has just revised its Policy

Statement¹, after 3 months consultation within the Aboriginal community. One of the new Chapters is entitled *Aboriginal people with disability* and it comprises a number of guiding principles and recommendations that will improve supports to Aboriginal people and communities in NSW.

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, the incidence of disability amongst Aboriginal people is 2.4 times that of the general Australian population. NCOSS contends that the following Guiding Principles and Recommendations from the Gathering Committee Policy Statement, while not developed for the education sector, directly affect the educational transitions of Aboriginal students with disability.

Cultural approach to disability

Guiding Principle 77: Aboriginal culture does not distinguish or label disability; therefore Aboriginal people with disability are often not identified. Culturally “disability” does not exist in the Aboriginal community. Aboriginal people may be unwilling to disclose disability due to stigma or misunderstanding. This results in very low referral rates for disability treatment, as well as disability development and support services.

Recommendation 84: Workers should be culturally aware that what society identified as disability, may not be recognised as disability by the Aboriginal person or their family or local community. Ensure that Aboriginal people with disability and families are not seeing workers as taking over but sharing the care or complementing their support. Workers must allow sit down time with the person and family and encourage them to work from the strengths of the person with disability.

Recommendation 85: Community Care workers must connect with disability specialist services to provide wholistic solutions for the Aboriginal person with disability and family.

Recommendation 86: Workers must make cross-agency links outside community care and disability to find isolated people and provide flexible responses, e.g. schools, Centrelink, housing. Cross-agency links must form part of regular business.

Work from strengths

Guiding Principle 78: Services and supports to Aboriginal people with disability and families must include the capacity and resources to enable participants to build cultural resourcefulness. The Gathering Committee acknowledges the cultural strengths of Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people with disability and families require supports that allow and encourage self sufficiency within the Aboriginal family unit.

Clearly these Guiding Principles and Recommendations were developed for community care services but when the overall goal is improved supports to Aboriginal people with disability, the objectives are easily transferable.

The Gathering Committee has had several lengthy discussions on the importance in schools of Aboriginal Education Liaison Officers (AELO), on how those positions have sometimes been diverted into other functions or have not been readily available for their intended purpose. Given the incidence of disability amongst Aboriginal people and the fact that disability is not readily disclosed or identified, the role of well resourced, informed, well supported and locally available AELOs will be critical at transition points for Aboriginal students with disability and other additional and complex needs. NCOSS recommends that the Standing Committee on Social Issues seeks the direct input of Aboriginal experts in this area.

¹ *Challenge Change and Choice* Policy Statement 2011 to be published later in 2011.

INQUIRY CONSIDERATIONS FROM THE BACKGROUND PAPER:

From early childhood education to primary school

NCOSS received input regarding the transition of students with additional or complex needs from early childhood to school. Again, this transition was described as often difficult and haphazard. This was compounded by problems in reaching families from diverse cultural backgrounds and families of very young students with extremely high needs at this early stage. The following recommendations were provided to NCOSS to facilitate a smoother transition to primary school:

- Review guidelines around assessment to support the use of functional assessment rather than relying on psychometric testing
- Increased funding to provide transition to school programs for all children who have disabilities
- Improved communication with families regarding the timelines particularly in regard to families being informed if their child has been accepted into a support class or special school
- Enhanced support to families during the time of transition
- Schools to work in partnership with the early childhood programs organisations and early childhood intervention staff to support successful transition
- Training for school principals to ensure that school leaders welcome children with disabilities
- Increased funding towards the training of teachers to develop the skills to include and teach children who have disabilities

NCOSS refers the Standing Committee to the submission from the Pathways Early Childhood Intervention Inc. for further information on this transition.

From primary to secondary school

Students with brain injury

The NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) website reports that Disability Programs supporting children with special learning needs can provide specific resources:

Access to specialist resources is facilitated through the student's school. For students with disabilities, the type and nature of the disability need to be initially assessed and confirmed using [Disability Criteria](#) (Ms word 40kB) through the school counselling service. For these students, a range of specialist services related directly to the needs of the student can be sought.

The Brain Injury Association of NSW BIANSW reports, however, that cognitive disability is not included in the DET policy document 'Disability Criteria'² (school sector). As indicated above, this is the criteria by which families can apply for access to specialist resources and support.

BIANSW cites a recent contact: "A member has contacted us in relation to her 13 year old son who received quite good support at primary school, but this has been much reduced since he transitioned to high school. He is very intelligent and so is in accelerated learning streams; however, he has significant difficulties in cognition and memory that are

² NSW Govt Education & Training:
<http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/schoolsweb/studentsupport/programs/disabilitypgrms/disabcriteria.doc>

unrecognised. He receives some assistance with physical mobility, but none for his cognitive disabilities.”

There is no disability in the list that would indicate a student with an acquired brain injury could be considered for support unless they lodge an individualised request for consideration. The DET Disability Criteria list is dated 2003 and BIANSW reports there are currently no plans to update it.

From secondary school to employment, further education, or other post-school options.

Deafblind students

The Deafblind Association of NSW expressed concern regarding the transition of Deafblind children leaving school. There is ongoing concern that Deafblind students leaving the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children (RIDBC) to enter community access services may not be given appropriate opportunity or support to enter Employment training services, due to lack of communication support and possibly inadequate staff training.

The Deafblind Association representative provided NCOSS with a salient reminder: “...Prior to this, when there were more Deafblind people leaving RIDBC at 18, they went back into the community or into group homes or institutions, having learned to sign at school, without staff or others being trained to communicate, leading to extremely isolating lives within these situations. This cannot be allowed to happen again.”

Students with mental health issues

The NSW Consumer Advisory Group – Mental Health Inc³ (NSW CAG) is a statewide organisation that provides an ongoing opportunity for mental health consumers to participate in policy and service development, implementation and evaluation. NSW CAG operates as a bridge between consumers in NSW and state and federal governments. In April 2011, NSW CAG conducted face to face and online consultations, with approximately 86 respondents. One of the sections focused on ‘Transitions’ and asked consultation participants to share their experiences during times of transition, when they were leaving school and looking for work or during times they were considering further education, training or changing workplaces. Consultation participants were asked to consider what supports were helpful and what they needed but didn’t have.

Issue 1: continuity of support networks

Some young people told NSW CAG that while they felt supported in secondary school, during transition time they were confused about what supports were available (in TAFE or uni) or didn’t find the services as helpful. One young person told NSW CAG that the transition was:

“Very difficult. At school I had support networks in place (like a guidance counsellor, school nurse and I was seeing a youth mental health worker as well). Then when I finished school, all those support networks were cut off which made it very difficult. At university there are measures in place for students who are mentally ill but in reality, in my opinion it wasn't very supportive. So I struggled alot to the point where I had to drop out of university.”

(NSW CAG online participation consultant, April 2011)

³ www.nswcag.org.au

Issue 2: workforce development

Young people told us that often teachers and teachers' aides weren't equipped to identify mental health issues. Young people repeatedly told NSW CAG that in hindsight, they wished that someone would have taken the time to talk with them and see why they were acting out rather than punishing them for behavioural offences.

Some young people also told us that they preferred alternative learning environments (such as ALESCO⁴). Since places are limited in these learning environments, it would be better if teachers in mainstream schools were better able to work with young people who have complex needs.

Young people, particularly those in regional and rural areas, told NSW CAG that they didn't have counsellors or career advisors at their schools to help them consider and plan for their options.

Issue 3: Premature transitions, need for earlier intervention

Some young people told NSW CAG that they lacked the supports required to stay in school until critical transition times. Family violence and breakdown, negative experiences with school (often due to stigma, social exclusion and bullying) and other issues resulted in some young people leaving school and/or home at a young age. Many of these young people experienced pregnancy at a young age and/or homelessness.

Direct contacts to NCOSS

Since the Transition Inquiry was announced, NCOSS has received personal stories from people at education transition points concerned for themselves or their loved ones. NCOSS encouraged the people to directly submit their stories to the Inquiry but also agreed to represent their issues. The following summaries are provided with the permission of the people but without identifiable details as arranged with them.

Mother of 17 year old son with brain injury

This mother is the long-term foster mother of a young man, 17 years, with brain injury and autism. The mother is alarmed that her son is being offered what she sees as only leisure activities when he leaves school, being directly channelled into Community Participation or Transition to Work programs. The son wants to pursue further education. There seems to be no support for the young man to continue his education, like other young people his age would, towards career possibilities. The mother can find no assistance from the school and wonders what to do next and how to go about arranging continued education to assist her son.

Pensioner Education Supplement on the Disability Support Pension

A person with a mental health condition on the Disability Support Pension wants to explore a new employment/career opportunity but needs to complete a study course to enter this career. The person called NCOSS complaining that the Pensioner Education Supplement for people on the Disability Support Pension had not increased with inflation or indexation for many years, thereby eroding the possibilities of people with disability to improve their skills towards employment.

⁴ ALESCO See <http://www.acenorthcoast.com.au/special-programmes/alesco/p/216>

Conclusion

Many of the early transition points for people with disability are education-related, and their positive or negative experiences during this time influence their goals and expectations long into the future. These 2 stories indicate the magnitude of the whole story for the person at critical transition points in the person's life. The stories also indicate the critical importance of education as it relates to personal supports such as income supports, accessible information, available and trusted guidance, even transport and housing etc.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into the Inquiry. Should you require further information, please contact Christine Regan, Senior Policy Officer,

Yours sincerely,

Alison Peters

Director