

Submission
No 721

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

Name: Ms Marcelle Buxton

Date received: 19/04/2010

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

SUBMISSION (14/4/2010)

Please make this submission public.

Ms Robyn Parker
Committee Chair
Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2

I am the mother of a five year old child diagnosed with High Functioning Autism (HFA) and wish to make a submission to this inquiry.

Since my son was diagnosed with his condition in May 2009, I have learnt that increasing numbers of children are being diagnosed with HFA and Aspergers Syndrome and these kids struggle to survive in mainstream education as they get older. This is because their different learning style, social isolation, acute anxiety and various sensory sensitivities lead to many not being able to reach their full academic potential in the mainstream setting and this is a real shame because they are extremely intelligent.

I have been disturbed by the amount of parents I am meeting with HFA & Aspergers primary school kids of various ages, who are saying that mainstream high school will not be an option for their kids and that they plan to home school for high school.

I have also been shocked to hear from parents of HFA and Aspergers kids who have already finished high school, say how traumatised their kids are after finishing school, having withstood years and years of relentless bullying and now they struggle to function in the adult world.

I think that we need to get small high schools set up in Australia specifically for students with HFA or Aspergers. At the moment there seems to be no other social schooling options in this country, other than mainstream for the kids at the higher end of the autism spectrum.

We are failing these Aspergers and HFA kids miserably for the following reasons:

1) The EDUCATION of our children.

- They are not being taught the way they learn.
- They are not being taught what they need to learn.
- They are not being taught by qualified teachers.
- Staff are interacting with our children without knowing the child's special needs or areas of difficulty often in a discriminatory manner.
- The curriculum discriminates against the child.(exams, essays, speeches, homework, assignments, small group activities, sports carnivals,)
- Extra and additional school activities discriminate against the child, (excursions, after school clubs, programs with limited competitive places , sports carnivals, cross countries, walkathons, school sports teams)

- Segregation within the class room and rejoining the class is disruptive to the learning process.
- School policies discriminate against the child. (methods of investigating allegations of misbehaviour, applying punishments that are undue or inappropriate for the child.)
- The small groups working with teachers aids are made up of children with wide and varying learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities and physical disabilities. One style of learning is not appropriate to all.
- The child's peers are not educated about Aspergers or High Functioning Autism.

2) The WELLBEING of our children.

- All of the matters set out above impact in a negative way on our children's self esteem, psychological well-being and in the worst case their physical well-being and health.
- Many examples can be given of unnecessary unhappiness at school caused by inappropriate teacher behaviour, inappropriate behaviour by peers and on occasion, inappropriate behaviour by others parents who have access to the school grounds.
- Consistant failure impacts on our children's self esteem and future learning behaviour.
- Inability to participate in all areas of school life that are available to the neurotypical child is a further confirmation of more failure.
- Being misunderstood and mistreated by uneducated teachers contributes to our children's frustration and anxiety levels
- Unreasonable expectations driven by the curriculum contribute to the child's frustration and anxiety levels and reinforce further episodes of failure and inability.
- Punishment for those areas of a child's behaviour that are beyond the child's control contributes to psychological damage and confusion for the child.

The combination of all these issues are disastrous for the child's learning and wellbeing.

Now that there is hard evidence that these kids brains are wired differently and they have a different learning style to their neurotypical peers, educators need to consider this option.

I also think it is unfair that these kids have to put up with high school bullying (as the current statistics are that 90% of kids with ASD's get bullied at mainstream high schools). The playground, being a mostly unsupervised area proves a major issue for the Aspergers / HFA kids and the place where most become the victims of bullying attacks. The toilet blocks in schools and other unmonitored areas are also high risk places for them to be subjected to bullying attacks.

Many mainstream high schools have special education units in them but these are not autism specific classes generally, so the only real benefit to the ASD kids is the smaller class sizes and most high functioning ASD kids don't qualify for these classes anyway. Any kids that do gain access to these smaller classes

still need to battle the mainstream playground, unless they are made to spend recess and lunch in 'safe areas' which further isolates them.

ASPECT have informed me that there are 'Satellite Classes' with Autism specific trained teachers that cater to Aspergers / HFA kids, but there are only a total of five of these classes at high schools in the whole of NSW and only one of these is located at a high school in Sydney (Menai) and again, the kids still have to battle the mainstream playground!

These kids are being permanently psychologically damaged by being made to withstand our system and 'fit the mould'.

I know that many people are determined to see 'inclusive' education for all in the mainstream setting but to them I would say, isn't it better to feel socially accepted for who you are in a small school with similar people to yourself where the teachers are specifically trained to teach you in the way that your brain is wired to learn, than to feel completely abandoned, ignored, bullied and isolated in a large mainstream setting where all you are worth to the school is the funding your diagnosis attracts? There is nothing inclusive about that scenario!

I am of the view that having a few small high schools with a modified curriculum tailoring to Aspergers and HFA in each state, could really benefit these kids and if large ASD friendly companies (such as banks, engineering, IT type firms) got on board with sponsoring kids for on the job work experience programs as part of the curriculum, as well as buddy systems being put in place with local mainstream high schools so the kids could participate in social skilling programs, it could lead to them having a real chance at succeeding at life and being less traumatised by not having to put up with neurotypical bullies.

Other countries such as the US and UK already have these types of high schools available as an option

I find it incredible that this has not occurred in Australia yet, especially NSW. It would be fantastic if NSW could be the first state to see the realisation of high schools such as these.

If you wish to see more peoples views on this issue there is an active online petition addressed to the Federal Government, where there are currently over 270 peoples signatures requesting that these schools be created urgently in Australia. **You will notice that the majority of signatures so far are from NSW.** Here is the link:

<http://www.gopetition.com.au/online/35002.html>

Sincerely,
Marcelle Buxton