

Submission
No 284

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

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disability or special needs.**

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Information on the author, Karyn Ingram.

I am the mother (and carer) of 14-year-old Alexander who has Cerebral Palsy, Epilepsy, Cortical Vision Impairment and Intellectual Delay.

Alexander is fully dependant, requiring assistance in all areas of life including feeding, communication, mobility (wheelchair) and toileting. He can however, make it very clear if he approves or disapproves of social choices (he hates shopping) and has shown sufficient evidence of a good level of understanding of conversation and directives.

Alexander is an amiable young man who enjoys watching rugby league (he is a Parramatta Eels fan) and skateboarding. He is very social and loves time with family and friends.

Alexander attends School, – a School for
Specific Purposes (SSP) – and is currently in Year 8 equivalent. He has
attended this school since he was 5 years old.

Addressing the Terms of Reference

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

Firstly I would like to comment that I believe it is important to maintain the current choices of education settings for children with disability.

There are many who argue that we shouldn't have segregated schools or IM and IO classes within mainstream schools. I disagree. Whilst the argument for inclusion is an important one, I also feel that families should have choices available to them for their child.

My particular concern in regards to funding however is that it falls short for each student regardless of the setting. Students in mainstream schools have been known to 'share' a teacher's aide because funding is insufficient. Funding for a student in SSPs is swallowed up by the running of the entire school and, because of this, I have no idea just how much funding my child receives.

What I do know is that the "nature, level and adequacy of funding for the education of children with a disability" is reflected in the lack of training for staff, the insufficient therapy for students and the inability of schools to implement meaningful curriculums.

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.

Blindingly obvious, really.

Before starting school, Alexander was assessed as being of poor intellectual ability by an out of date test that had no allowance for a child with no speech and limited fine motor skills.

He was then allocated funding without knowing his true level of intellect or understanding his abilities and limitations.

Matching funding to a 'label' is an easy option but I can think of any number of children whose level of disability reads the same as Alexander's. And yet, their capabilities and needs are entirely different. The current funding process is as outdated as the assessment process.

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

I find it hilarious that locally, there are now not enough places at our SSPs to meet demand and families are being forced to send their children to mainstream schools. Hilarious because we, and many others, would have liked to send our child to the local mainstream school but NSW Education District Office determined that the most appropriate place for a child with severe disability is an SSP.

Mainstream is just too hard.

We now have a situation where there are children in a SSP who would clearly benefit from mainstream schooling and children who need placement in a SSP are being turned away. Hilarious! Except it's not!!

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

Alexander does not attend a mainstream setting however, I would like to comment that we were deterred by our District Office and the local school from considering this option. Both told us that support for Alexander would be inadequate.

Initially, we explored the option of Alexander attending a SSP four days per week and his local school for one day per week. We attended meetings with the Principals and Special Education Officer believing that he would benefit socially and that this would also provide Alexander with integration in to the local community. Unfortunately, this option was very quickly shelved when the Principal of the mainstream

school realised that Alexander had no speech and she informed us she would be unable to provide him with appropriate support. She claimed that funding for a child with a disability would go to the 'primary placement' and, as the 'secondary placement' she would not be entitled for any funding for Alexander. District Office supported this claim and we were made to drop the idea.

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

I am particularly disappointed in the lack of a suitable curriculum for children with intellectual disability. Our experience has shown that curriculum is largely dependant on individual teachers and how much they believe the students understand.

I remain astonished at how one year of schooling can look entirely different to the next.

Some of our experiences include;

- Alexander being 'taught' about farm animals four times over by the time he had turned 8 (soft and fluffy things seem to be the order of the day for students with disability).
- Being told by a teacher, "So long as they're comfortable and happy, that's all that really matters."

- Witnessing hostility toward a new teacher (from other teachers) who insisted on meaningful teaching and challenged the lack of a curriculum.
- Currently facing a 'life skills' program that includes grooming e.g. how to comb hair and brush teeth. Alexander's fine motor skills are limited and this component of the 'curriculum' is simply a time waster.

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

What access? Seriously.

At School we have a Physiotherapist who receives funding from Ageing, Disability and Home Care (ADHC) to run a program however, a condition of the funding is that she is available to clients outside the school as well as within it. Also, she spends a considerable amount of time reporting back to ADHC and justifying her position at the school.

Occupational therapy and Speech therapy services are provided to the school by ADHC and they are scant at best. Students (and teachers) are lucky if they receive even one quick visit per term from a therapist. Vision support for my son has been even scarcer with teachers

repeatedly telling me they cannot get a Vision Support worker to attend let alone provide any helpful information.

When ADHC staff to attend the school, I am concerned about their lack of professionalism. In 2009, two visiting ADHC staff exchanged information about Alexander without consideration of basis or confidentiality, for which I lodged a formal complaint with our School Principal and withdrew permission for exchange of information with external services.

The very disappointing aspect to the current system of “accessing professional services” etc is it fails to acknowledge that these services are a very important component of life for a child with disability. For example, a child with limited fine motor skills needs considerable occupational therapy if they are ever to learn to use communication devices. NSW Education needs to recognise that these services are essential and we shouldn't be “accessing” them, they should be an integral part of the curriculum and the student's daily school life.

Lastly, whilst our current School Counsellor appears to be more active in the school than previous counsellors, I remain concerned that they are not adequately trained in speaking with and helping students with limited communication. There are genuine endeavours by our counsellor to engage parents and carers but a real lack of adequate support for students.

For example, a number of years ago three local children with disability died within one school term. Two were from our school, the third was known to us. The deaths were very distressing for the close-knit community of disability and most people knew at least one of the children. I was invited to speak at an interagency forum that sought to address the grief that local professionals and service providers were experiencing. My capacity was as a parent who was doing a considerable amount of work at home with her son to address HIS grief. It became increasingly obvious that the attendees hadn't thought about how to address the children who were grieving the loss of their friends.

Personally, I noticed two things. Firstly, there was no attempt by our school to speak with or counsel the students over the loss of two students in one term. Secondly, teachers and therapists were all guilty of discussing the deaths inappropriately in front of the students. I still remain appalled at this experience and I believe it is a particular blight on the education system.

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

In 2007 we wrote, as a P&C, to the Director of Disability Programs, Mr Brian Smythe-King regarding the training of new teachers who work with students with disability. We were concerned that the minimal

amount of training teachers receive places unnecessary pressure on them and leaves students with a sub standard education. They are expected to teach students with complex learning needs and yet, "they have not had to complete comprehensive and appropriate training", we wrote. Teachers can be expected to teach a student with vision impairment and Cerebral Palsy one year, and a student with low functioning Autism the next.

Of course, the response we received to our letter was negligible and did little to allay our concerns.

With regards to ongoing professional training I believe that our teachers do not receive sufficient training to stay up to date with the latest technologies and research relating to disability. Training in this sector is often expensive and unfortunately, the average school budget simply does not allow for the best possible training.

Further, there are no real measures of teacher performance in the education of children with disability as there are no performance indicators for the students themselves. No one questions whether a student with disability has reached his or her full potential and hence, we have no evidence of our teachers' ability.

8. Any other related matters.

I like to believe that School was the right option for our son. But there remains a nagging suspicion that school has provided little more than baby-sitting.

At the beginning of each year I attend the school to sit with yet another teacher to discuss Alexander's Individual Education Plan. It's never really changed much. What I hope for more than anything is that we can work with the school to assist Alexander to communicate, in real terms, that wicked sense of humour he possesses. At the end of each year I am faced with the reality of being no closer to this goal than when he started school 9 years ago.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Regards,

Karyn Ingram