

Submission
No 234

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

Organisation: The Families in Partnership Cooperative

Name: Ms Jo-Anne Hewitt

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The Families in Partnership Cooperative is pleased to have the opportunity to make this submission to the NSW Legislative Council enquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs.

Who is The Families in Partnership Cooperative?

The Families in Partnership Co-operative was formed in 1995 by a group of parents who wanted to do more for their family member who had a disability. Together with local professionals working in the Macarthur region, they forged a partnership to provide better outcomes for their family and others in similar situations.

Over the years, Co-operative members have provided a vital knowledge base in developing programs and better access to services for people who have a disability and their carers. The Families in Partnership Cooperative enables families, carers and professionals to work together to:

- Support each other
- Learn and grow together
- Create networks of local support and services
- Develop a positive awareness within the wider community

What is this submission about?

In preparing this submission The Families in Partnership Cooperative has relied on the testimony of families with a child or children with a disability, about their experiences. We have taken the opportunity to tell the stories of a small number of these children to illustrate the challenges faced by children with disabilities and their families in the NSW Education system. This submission will identify some common themes in the experience of children and young people with a disability and their families and will outline the solutions that our members have identified as having worked for them.

These stories are but a handful of the experiences that The Families in Partnership Cooperative members share on a regular basis. Whilst each child has had a unique trajectory our families report some common challenges in negotiating the Education system in NSW.

These include:

- Children with High-Functioning Autism and Asperger's are often not diagnosed until late primary or early high school. By this time, disruptive behaviour, school refusal and poor academic achievement are often entrenched.
- Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder are often labelled as "naughty" or "disruptive" and it can take many years before a skilled and responsive teacher looks beyond the behaviour to discover the real cause of the child's difficulties.
- Parents are often accused of being over-protective, bothersome or over-anxious and are often seen as the cause of the child's difficulties when they are attempting to advocate for their child.
- Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders are often isolated within the mainstream school system due to their behaviours, compounding their already significant social difficulties.
- Parents are often faced with exorbitant expenses for clinical assessments, specialised equipment such as lap-top computers, and on-going speech, occupation and psychological therapy to ensure their child's educational success.
- The skills and experience of teachers and other educational staff needed to identify, support and teach children with a disability in the mainstream setting are highly variable.
- Children are often provided with specialist support when their behaviour at school becomes unmanageable, however this support is often withdrawn once their behaviour is settled. The withdrawal of support can serve to re-ignite the child's disruptive behaviour creating a vicious cycle and reducing the child's chances of educational success.
- Increasingly families are being steered toward distance education where a child has shown little engagement with the mainstream school system. This creates a burden on families' financial and emotional resources and there is little compensation afforded for this burden.
- Children with a disability whose needs are best met by Distance Education are provided with a standard curriculum and do not have access to the additional supports, including specialist curriculum development, remedial classes and behaviour support, that would be normally allocated to them in the mainstream school system.

Our experiences with the school system vary from school to school, teacher to teacher and class to class. There is no one better system, Catholic, Public, mainstream or special school. In the following section, our families have identified the strategies that have worked for them to make their child's educational experience a positive one.

Whilst we, as parents, have shared some common challenges, there are many examples of good practice in the education system that we can point to, which have provided positive experiences for our children. These include:

- Children whose disabilities are diagnosed early have a better start at school. Preparation and a planned transition to school enable parents and teachers to communicate about the child's needs and interests and to prepare the child for the challenges ahead.
- Teachers and other school staff who are flexible, supportive and understanding of the child's needs can avoid the cycle of challenging behaviour and enhance the child's opportunities for educational success
- Teachers and other school staff who have knowledge and understanding about Autism Spectrum Disorders are better equipped to know what makes our kids tick and thus better able to meet their educational needs.
- Teachers and parents working in partnership, with open, honest and regular communication encourage the child's educational success and enhance the child's overall school experience
- Children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder often learn more effectively when allowed to use specific tools such as "fidget toys" and sensory aids which can serve to encourage focus and reduce anxiety.
- Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders, as well as children with other sensory and physical disabilities, often learn best using technology such as computers. Many children with disabilities spend their day laboriously completing hand written tasks which can be completed more speedily and enjoyably using a computer. These devices also serve to enhance a child's communication skills and increase their social connectivity when skilfully and purposefully employed.
- Children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder often have Splinter Skills which compensate for areas of deficit. For example a child who struggles to read may present with exceptional aptitude for and interest in numbers. These children learn best when their Special Interests are acknowledged and encouraged and where their teachers have access to specialised curriculum support.
- Children with a disability require access to assessments and therapy whether speech, occupational or psychology. These are most effective when provided in collaboration with the child's parents and teacher and access to essential assessment and therapy should not be dependent on a parent's financial capacity.
- Teachers who take the time to learn the full story, to listen to parents, to read therapy reports and to hear the experiences of the child are more successful in engaging the child in learning, managing a child's behaviour and contributing to a child's engagement with education than those who see the child as just one of the class.