

Submission  
No 281

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

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**COUNTRY WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF NEW SOUTH WALES**



**SUBMISSION:  
NEW INQUIRY - The provision of  
education to students with a disability or  
special needs**

**To:** The Director  
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2  
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**From:** Social Issues Committee  
Country Women's Association of NSW

**19 February 2010**

We thank the Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2 for the opportunity to present a submission to the New Inquiry on the Provision of Education to Students with a Disability or Special Needs. Our focus will be on all children in New South Wales, with particular emphasis on the vulnerable children from the rural and remote areas.

There is only one thing worse than being a parent of a child with a disability or special needs, and that is to be a parent of a child with a disability or special needs living in a rural or remote area. There, assistance of any kind is very thin on the ground.

Whereas a physical disability in a child is detected early, conditions such as lack of communication and language skills are picked up in city and regional areas in preschools, short and long day care and early childhood learning centres. However, these centres are not easily accessible in rural and remote areas. In the city, parents (sometimes having reserved their children's places two to three years in advance) use these centres where children's emotional, communication, hearing, speech problems etc can be assessed. The children can then be taken to private or hospital specialists for treatment, to have them able to begin school or kindergarten as well prepared as possible. This is denied the children from rural and remote areas.

Parents from rural and remote areas seek assistance for their children from the GPs, non-existent school counsellors and local specialists in speech, hearing etc, and then have to travel hundreds of kilometres to reach "usually booked out" specialists in city or regional areas. These parents are desperate to have their child given all help possible before he/she starts school; knowing he/she will have to attend mainstream classes, all of which appear to have an increasing number of autistic and aspergers syndrome students competing for the stretched attention of teachers, aides and (in some areas) itinerant special education teachers.

Individual assessment, a solid infrastructure and available resources are required for each student with a disability or special needs to survive in mainstream education, and all of these necessities are not available for rural or remote children.

There is (or was) only one place in New South Wales capable of helping these country children: the former and now restructured Dalwood Assessment Centre/Palm Avenue School at Seaforth. There the children (sometimes having to wait two years to be on the list) could be assessed on a one to one basis and a treatment package given.

The Newcastle Herald (1.2.2010), reviewing children in the Newcastle, Lower and Upper Hunter areas, headlined that one in three Muswellbrook children have serious developmental problems by the time they enter school (according to a landmark Federal Government survey listing inadequate basic

physical, social, emotional, communication and language skills). Project leader Professor Frank Oberklaid, of the Centre for Community Child Health, said the survey "clearly showed that education needed to start in early childhood because some children were on a 'trajectory to failure'." A Kurri Kurri Preschool Director said that only about two thirds of Hunter children attended early childhood centres and cost was the biggest hurdle. She said about 25% of her 118 preschoolers had severe language delay. The preschool already employs a speech pathologist and occupational therapist, and is also working on a proposal to employ a psychologist this year. However this surveyed area is only two to three hours away from Sydney and cannot be compared to rural and remote areas.

The solution/remedy for the following seven points is an increase in funding, a "very big increase in funding".

### **Adequacy in Funding**

A report in the Daily Telegraph (8.1.2010) noted "families with severely disabled children said they had become the victims of an under-funded school system incapable of adequately providing for special needs", and this concerned only city and regional schools. "A survey of 800 primary and high school principals has found programs for students with special needs are severely over-stretched and under-resourced."

Funding for students with a disability or special needs in a special class or in a mainstream class is a very big concern. All schools struggle with the allocation of school funds. The funding the school divides up for use has to cover all needs for a school year. With increasing numbers of students with special needs, schools have found it difficult to provide for all specific needs. Many students need assistance to attend mainstream elective classes and it is difficult to provide extra aide time for the students to be supported or to allow staff to be released for training and curriculum development. Ideally, the funding should allow a high level of training for staff, students and parents on adaptive technologies (parents need to be included in training, so that strategies employed at school can be carried on at home, thereby keeping consistency), communication devices and methods, specific programs and other areas that assist learning and social development. If city and regional schools cannot attain this, what chance do the rural and remote area schools have?

### **Funding Allocation...to Functioning Capacity or to Disability?**

All members of the Social Issues Committee agreed that education should be focused on a student's potential for achievement, and aimed at bringing each student to his/her standard of curriculum. Aiming at a student's "functioning capacity" is engraining inequality by this very wording. Education cannot be denied on the basis of so called lack of functioning capacity. One wonders if humanism is being lost to "administrative functioning capacity."

### **Level and adequacy of current special education places**

In rural and remote areas, through lack of numbers, special education places are rare. In the city and regional areas, there are special schools catering for physically and intellectually disabled and conduct disordered students; and primary and secondary schools with special classes, with the necessary adjuncts – ramps, lifts, toilets, special teachers and special aides. However, many parents insist on mainstream classes for their child. Rural and remote parents have no choice in the matter – there are no special schools and no special classes. The funding allocation for these small schools is severely affected by having to provide ramps, special toilets, aides etc.

From a NSW Department of Education & Training Information Report on Special Education Classes and Provisions (July 2009): "Over 33,000 school children with a disability are enrolled in NSW public schools – that equates to 80% of total students with a disability in NSW". The Department of Education has 106 schools (including 10 hospital schools) covering mental health, autism, physical, deaf, blind, mild, moderate and severe intellectual categories, but none in rural or remote areas.

The only chance rural and remote children have to overcome their disability, particularly being able to read, is to be accepted at the former Dalwood Assessment Centre, be assessed there, then spend a month at the Palm Avenue School being further assessed and taught – one on one, face to face – then sent home with an information package to a mainstream class in a country school, where the teacher, parents and (a usually non-existent) aide can, using the professional information package, improve the literacy of those children. There have been spectacular, life-changing results for these children and parents. Often, the teacher is able to use the information package for other children.

The news that this highly successful Dalwood/Palm Avenue Centre was to be restructured and relocated has completely devastated country parents and children. One week concerned parents, the Isolated Children's Parents' Association of NSW, the Country Women's Association of NSW and other stakeholders were appealing for increased funding and staffing at Dalwood, because there was such a back-log of children needing to be assessed. The next week, without any consultation with the stakeholders and, giving the reason that the facility "was being under-utilised", advice was given that the centre was to be moved to Westmead, experienced staff made redundant, and all "bookings" cancelled. The lives of so many young children have been devastated. The transfer of Dalwood and Palm Avenue School to Westmead is a recipe for disaster unless it offers the same programs and residential facilities currently provided.

As at mid-February 2010, the new location of the Assessment Centre is a mystery, and when it is found, continuity of service is not guaranteed after the second term 2010. Parents are not able to make contact with Department of Education and Training staff to discuss reserved assessment

times for their children. The offices and rooms formerly used by Dalwood to assess the children one on one prior to their attendance at Palm Avenue School, are now occupied by other government agencies. No doubt, the removal of these government agencies will not produce the bad publicity which would be generated by the eviction of country children *who just want to learn to read*.

The former Palm Avenue School is now located, not in a purpose-built school as before, but in a demountable at Westmead. The residential program will be carried out at the Far West Children's Home at Manly, a great distance from Westmead. It is to be hoped that transport will be made available and offered to the country parents. One can just imagine the nightmare it will be transferring children from Manly to Westmead and to wherever the Assessment Centre is located. It speaks much of the devotion and determination of these country parents to give their children a good start in education, that they will put up with such appalling conditions.

The former Dalwood and Palm Avenue centres, jointly run by the NSW Departments of Health and Education & Training, are coordinated by the North Sydney Central Coast Area Health Service, which has been winding back every possible service. Funding will now go to the Children's Hospital Education Research Institute at Westmead.

Why can the education ministers not realise that every child who benefits from assessment at the former Dalwood/Palm Avenue centre is one less child to be looked after by non-existent specialists at rural and remote schools – leading to less expense on the system?

The Country Women's Association of NSW is appalled at the apparent grab for money (at the expense of education and our children) exhibited by the State Government. First there was the take-over of land (playgrounds) deemed to be thought excessive to the needs of schools; then there was the attempt to take over Hurlstone Agricultural High School's land; and now the eviction of vulnerable young country children from the Dalwood/Palm Avenue facility.

The alternative offered by the New South Wales Government to replace one on one assessment and teaching at Dalwood is quite inadequate – video conferencing (with non-existent rural and remote support specialists), webcams, smart boards, "connected classrooms", "Best Start" programs. Have these organisers ever ventured beyond the sandstone curtain? Don't they know that rural and remote schools are not set up electronically as well as city and regional schools?

All stakeholders, especially the children, are praying for a return to rational thinking on the part of the State Government and a return to the Seaforth site.

Another distressing education situation is the predicted closing at the end of 2010 of Kingsdene weekly boarding school for intellectually disabled children between 10 to 18 years (the only one in the state), run by Anglicare and funded by Anglicare, the NSW Department of Ageing and Home Care and the State and Federal Departments of Education. This is such a worthy, life-saving facility for families and should be kept open with additional funding. However, in the Daily Telegraph (14.1.2010) Federal Education Minister Julia Gillard said the government "remained committed to assisting Kingsdene's students and their families as they transition to alternative care arrangements." Where can they go - nursing homes for the aged? There is no alternative. We believe it is imperative that Kingsdene is kept open.

### **Adequacy of support services for children with a disability in mainstream school classes**

There is a great reluctance from the education system to take children with special needs into schools, because the schools have to adjust and modify their schools and their classrooms. It always comes down to money, and, no doubt, this is the reason state schools have 80% of special needs enrolment. Even when there is a special class for IM and IO children with qualified "special teachers", many parents insist that their child is to go into a mainstream class, without any concern for the costs involved or pressure on the staff and the education system.

Funding of students in mainstream classes is often based on additional aide time for a small number of hours per week, so the school has to determine the most crucial time and then find an aide who is available at that time or is willing to work for 1 or 2 hours, often in the middle of the day.

An article in the Newcastle Herald (27.1.2010) entitled "Language Support Schools in Danger" reported that "a small group of children in the Wollongong area with severe language problems, for the first time in decades, will not have access to a language support class. The Wollongong children are part of a trial of a new system in which they will be placed in mainstream classes and 'supported'." The parents predict that the children will be overwhelmed and miss the individual attention of the past. "But this so-called trial will be deemed a success by a government whose only motivation is saving money. It will then go ahead and abolish more than 30 language classes across the state." More money, not less, should be spent on these special needs children.

A report in the Daily Telegraph (8.1.2010) stated "a spokeswoman for NSW Education Minister Verity Firth said the Government aimed to provide a specialist teacher in every school and was consulting with the Teachers' Federation, parents and principals." This sounds wonderful, but no doubt, this will not extend west of the great divide. Most state schools are visited by itinerant specialist teachers for very short periods. A school principal out west teaching a 6<sup>th</sup> class of 24 pupils has an additional four special needs children

(with ADD). These four pupils see an itinerant special teacher for one hour a month. It must be most difficult for that teacher and for any casual aides.

When one thinks of that class of 28, one has to respect that teacher so much, when a TV report on 9.2.2010 revealed that private and independent school classes average 10 students per teacher. This is yet another case of more money being needed for staffing in state schools.

### **Provision of a suitable curriculum for intellectually disabled and conduct disordered students**

Few schools have casuals who are trained or have the skills to teach IM or IO classes, particularly with rising number of students with autism, aspergers syndrome etc. Therefore, replacing staff or starting new programs hinges on having the right people to carry out the programs. Also, many staff are not adept at providing a specific program for a student with a disability or special need in a mainstream class of nearly 30 other students, especially when many of those students have such a variety of needs. Training in this area does not seem to be something that is discussed as much as other items such as technology etc. One wonders whether too much technology is being thrown at education problems, especially for students with disabilities, when education would be better addressed by closer attention from a vastly increased number of suitably qualified teachers. An increase in funding needed.

### **Access to professional support services, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and school counsellors**

Access to these services and useful school counselling by experienced, trained staff is very hard to achieve in rural and remote areas, and the services are extremely expensive for most families. In school situations – depending on the area, city or rural – these services can be supplied through the school, but in most cases, the cost has to come out of the school funding. In regional areas the services can be accessed at local hospitals, usually with a long waiting list. More therapists are needed everywhere – city and regional, rural and remote. Again, more money has to be spent on training and employing these professionals; perhaps they, like doctors, could be given an incentive to “go bush”.

### **Adequacy of pre-service and post-service teacher training**

It needs a very special person to become a teacher of students with special needs, and it must be acknowledged that not all teachers are interested or suitable to teach these students.

More money has to be poured into this. Teachers have to be trained to manage and deal with high impact behaviour problems of students, to work with and support the demands and emotions of the students’ families. They have to be able to teach the aides in the classroom how to cope with all of this, and while it is acknowledged that teachers need refresher courses every



now and then, the schools find it difficult to allow staff to be released for training and curriculum development.

As is always the case, it is fairly easy for the city schools, but when rural and remote areas find it very difficult to attract doctors, nurses, dentists, specialists etc, one has to wonder if yet again, the rural and remote areas are going to miss out.

### **Conclusion**

- As stated above, greatly increased funding has to be spent on the education of students with special needs, especially those in country areas.
- With the acknowledged increase of children with serious developmental problems, increased funding will be needed to increase the number of special education places. Enlarging the restructured former Dalwood/Palm Avenue centre is essential.
- Increased funding will be sorely needed for employment of specialist teachers (not itinerant) and aides to cope with the influx.
- Increased funding is needed to educate and train personnel in support services such as speech and occupational services, school counsellors etc, and an incentive given to attract them to rural and remote areas.
- Increased funding will be needed to arrange for relief teachers to allow special education teachers to attend workshops and post service training.
- These children with special needs are so vulnerable – especially the forgotten ones in rural and remote areas – and need to be supported.
- If prompt assistance is not forthcoming, it is feared that, as Professor Frank Oberklaid said, there will be many children on a "trajectory to failure."

**Social Issues Committee  
Country Women's Association of NSW**