

Submission  
No 668

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

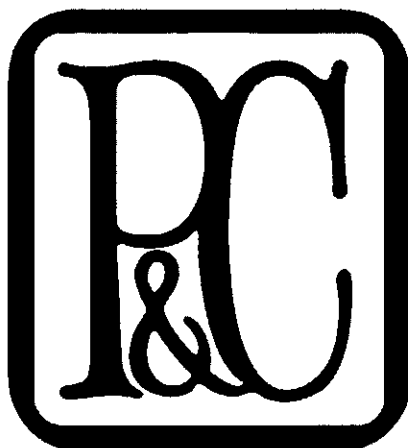
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**Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special  
needs**

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## **PREAMBLE<sup>1</sup>**

The Federation of Parents and Citizens' Association of New South Wales (P&C Federation) is committed to a free public education system which is open to all people, irrespective of culture, gender, academic ability and socio-economic class and empowers students to control their own lives and be contributing members of society.

This commitment is based on the belief that:

- All students have the capacity to learn;
- The Government has prime responsibility to provide an education system open to all, which is free and secular;
- Schools should be structured to meet the needs of individual students and should respect the knowledge those students bring to school and build on that knowledge to foster their understanding about the world.

Parents as partners in the education process, have a right and a responsibility to play an active role in the education of their children.

P&C Federation and its representatives share a responsibility of ensuring representative decision making for the benefit of all students.

## **Introduction**

The Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of New South Wales is thankful for this opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs. The P&C Federation strongly believes that reporting and evaluating on the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs in Australia and overseas could help to improve and develop the Australian approach.

The core belief of the Federation is that the education of our youth is the most fundamental means of ensuring individual and collective success and, as a result, our greatest national resource. The need, challenges and opportunities available to ensure equitable access is provided to all students across New South Wales. The Federation of Parents and Citizens' Association believes that individual needs should be met by a range of differential services expressed through appropriate and well planned curricula, programs and environments conducted by sensitive and well trained personnel in conjunction with parents and families.

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<sup>1</sup> Preamble of Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of NSW. 2008 P&C Handbook (6)

## **Introduction**

There is currently no national agreement on the definition of disability/ies. This probably needs to be addressed as it results in some conflict between government agencies over the criteria that needs to be addressed in order to access support for people with a disability.

The system of supporting people with a disability appears constantly to be in a state of flux which leads to people having anxiety about the level of support that does exist and why the need for constant change. Families feel threatened by what they perceive as a lack of support because they are continually having to learn new procedures in order to access support for their child.

Staff in the area feel threatened as they also feel there is a lack of support for them in the classroom when they have many students, with often undiagnosed disabilities, as part of their mainstream class.

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

As with most things, the level of funding for this area of education will never be adequate as the school population and the issues that it is addressing are constantly in a state of flux. The types and severity of disabilities is variable and widespread. In addition to the recognized disabilities of intellectual, physical, sensory and psychological, there are children entering the school system with genetic disorders which are unspecified as they have mutated from a previously known and recognized disorder. The educational needs of these students are often unknown and must be addressed as they arise. It can be that the level of support funding will change over time so it is difficult to forecast the adequacy of funding over an extended period.

As students age, the level of support they require also changes. For some, the level will reduce as they become familiar with their educational setting and it is only at transition points such as movement to High School that a review is required. For other students, their needs will increase with age as, in some cases, their disability is degenerative.

It can also be difficult to comment fully on the adequacy of funding as there is sometimes limited data on the level of certain disabilities and the demand for services in specific areas.

### **2/ Best practice approaches in determining the allocation of funding to children with a disability, particularly whether the allocation should be focused on a student's functioning capacity rather than their disability.**

Each student with a disability is an individual and their manifestation of the disability is also individual. Best practice approaches for allocating funding is probably at the stage of determining the needs of the student based on their adaptive functioning rather than based on the diagnosis that currently exists. Students with the same disability can manifest their needs in a different manner. The support they receive will be dependent on their home address (urban versus rural), their access to community support services, the timing of their diagnosis, the level of early intervention, their reaction to that intervention, the quality of support during the early intervention, the level of support offered to parents and their understanding of the disability/ disorder.

**Special needs education Overseas:**

The provision of education to people with special needs or learning differences differs across countries and across states. The ability of a student to access a particular resource depends on the availability of services, location, family choice, and government policy. For example, in some poor countries, students with special needs are unable to attend school.

**US:**

The US has a similar special needs education program to Australia. The US has an Individualised Education Program where students with special needs are assessed to determine their specific strengths and weaknesses.<sup>2</sup> Placement, resources, and goals are determined on the basis of the student's needs. Modifications to the regular program may include changes in curriculum, supplementary aides or equipment, and the provision of specialized physical adaptations that allow students to participate in the educational environment to the fullest extent possible. Students may need this help to access subject matter, to physically gain access to the school, or to meet their emotional needs. For example, if the assessment determines that the student cannot write by hand because of a physical disability, then the school might provide a computer for typing assignments, or allow the student to answer questions orally instead. If the school determines that the student is severely distracted by the normal activities in a large, busy classroom, then the student might be placed in a smaller classroom.

**England :**

Special Educational Needs Parent Partnership Service is the special educational needs assessment service, which is part of the Local Authority. SENCO refers to a special educational needs coordinator, who usually works with schools and the children within schools who have special educational needs.<sup>3</sup> They have a Department for Children, Schools and Families who oversee special education in England.

**Germany:**

In Germany, special needs children attend a school called Förderschule or Sonderschule (special school) that serves only special needs children. There are several types of special schools in Germany such as:

- The "Sonderschule für Lernbehinderte" - a special school serving children, who suffer from learning difficulties.
- The "Schule mit dem Förderschwerpunkt Geistige Entwicklung" - a special school serving children, who suffer from very severe learning difficulties.
- The "Förderschule Schwerpunkt emotionale und soziale Entwicklung" - a special school serving children, who have special emotional needs.

Only one in 21 German students attends a special school. Teachers at those schools are qualified professionals, who have specialized in "special needs education" while in college. Special schools often have a very favourable student teacher-ratio and facilities other schools do not have. Special

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<http://www.ped.state.nm.us/seo/lre/lre.booklet.pdf>

<http://www.mcgraw-hill.co.uk/openup/chapters/0335202888.pdf>

schools have been criticised. Some special needs children in Germany do not attend special school, but are mainstreamed into a Hauptschule or Gesamtschule (comprehensive school).<sup>4</sup>

Currently there is often quite a time lag between identification of a student's disability and its associated needs and the provision of services or supports to these students in Australia. The level of paperwork and the meeting of various placement/ funding committees can be such that they are timed for specific periods ie week 8 of each Term. This means that there can be months between the start of the process and the implementation of the support mechanism in the classroom for the student.

Consideration of acknowledging the changing identification of disabilities (marked increase in the identification of autism and mental health issues) should lead to including possible changes in the planning for schools resourcing needs and School Education Group's and Regional priorities. It must also be considered as part of the State Plan due to funding implications.

There needs to be consideration of the changing population in some areas of the state, of the transient nature of families who move to seek employment and therefore the ability to support students as they move around schools either within a city or across the state.

There also needs to be regular consultation with staff and parents to ensure feedback is considered in future decisions made.

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

The nature of disabilities is constantly changing and the current significant increase in the identification of students with autism and with mental health issues has meant that there is also a changing need in the special education places required by these students.

The DET has recognized this change with the introduction of Multicategorical classes within some schools catering for student with multiple disabilities but also for children with autism and with mental health issues.

There appears to have been some shift in the decision by parents to support their child entering Support classes (and particularly MC classes) rather than being integrated into mainstream classes. This may be due to improved curriculum options in Support classes, to the inclusion of additional aide support, the improvement of training for staff or just the smaller numbers in the classes which parents perceive as offering more one to one support to their child. Regardless of what the parent may choose, they need to have the options available to them.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.european-agency.org/country-information/germany/national-overview/special-needs-education-within-the-education-system>

There is some discrepancy between the provision of special education places in regional and metropolitan areas. While there may be waiting lists in some city areas, regional classes are under review as their level of take up of places has fallen below an allocated level. Naturally, it is more difficult in regional areas to maintain classes as the level of students with disabilities don't necessarily follow a pattern that allows for an indication of an ongoing need for the class placements. The introduction of the multicategorical class option has offered these regional areas more flexibility with which to cater for the varied needs of the students.

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

The funding of support for students in the classroom has been seen by many parents and schools as a positive step in providing additional support to teaching staff in busy classrooms where they are attempting to address the needs of students with physical, intellectual, sensory and psychological needs. In any one classroom, students with all of these needs, diagnosed and undiagnosed, sit side by side.

However, there is a need to offer the School Learning Support Officers (SLSO) who currently work within the system some form of security of tenure of their employment as well as training opportunities. These people are often the regular contact between students and staff especially within High School settings and can possess a wealth of information on the student's academic, social, emotional and behavioural needs. They can also be a contact between the student, the family and the school due to the length of time they spend with the student on a day to day basis. In some situations, the SLSO has an educational relationship with the student that covers many years.

There are sometimes restraints on schools particularly when there is the need to modify the physical environment to cater for the needs of the child. It is for this reason that the process of preparing for transitions of students to go to school or move from one school to another, as happens when students move to High School, should begin as soon as possible once the parent's choice of school has been determined. There needs to be regular contact between the school and the family as well as any external agency involved in the student's medical and educational needs. These are the individuals who have the most information about the student's needs and can support the school to develop and implement appropriate strategies.

Integration within a school is vital in allowing students to experience not only the academic but also the social aspects of educational experiences. By promoting inclusion of all students in school activities, students with support needs can participate in these activities with the level of support they require. However, for some students, this level of integration is restricted to the period covered by funding support. Without additional assistance, they struggle to participate in any meaningful way, with mainstream class activities.

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

For some students, the fact that they are able to attend school on a regular basis is the primary issue in their life. They have a consistent routine and set of consequences which allows them to

function in the school setting. However, they are then required to try to integrate a curriculum which does not make sense to them and has little value in their life. Many need a curriculum which will prepare them for life outside of the school system.

The introduction and refinement of the Lifeskills curriculum for Secondary students has offered a wider range of options but there are concerns that a similar program should also be available to the Primary level students. Although it has been acknowledged that school staff have the options to modify their activities within the classroom, there also needs to be professional support/ mentoring, especially of teachers in mainstream settings, to ensure they are aware of the modifications that are available and how they are able to be incorporated into the class program.

Part of the process of allowing students access to a curriculum is to have an Individual Education Plan that incorporates aspects such as the development of the student's functional skills, the role of all staff including the School Learning Support Officer, and the consistent approach between home and school. There also needs to be a link with community agencies which may be involved with the student including health and respite workers if relevant.

Similarly, there needs to be a consistent review of the plan with all interested and involved personnel (parent/ caregiver, school staff, community agencies) in attendance if possible.

#### **6/ Student and family access to professional support and services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy and school counselors.**

Access to professional support is difficult regardless of where students live. It has been said that students in rural and remote areas often have better access to these services as visiting specialists cater for the needs of the community through regular clinics. The relationship between the practitioner and the school can also be positive as school staff can, and often are, included in the case management of a student in a small community.

This may not occur in metropolitan areas even though the services available may be more numerous. It is interesting to note the way in which some states have recognized the value of professional supports such as school nurses and speech/ occupational therapists by employing these personnel to work directly with, and sometimes in, the school.

The school counselor has spent much of the last few years as part of the gate keeping process to assist with diagnosis/ identification of students, particularly those with intellectual disabilities. Some of the frustration for these professionals and parents has been the constant need to confirm a diagnosis at points of transition. For a student with a moderate intellectual disability, the disability is not going to be 'cured' and it is frustrating for the parents to be constantly required to acknowledge the negative aspects of their child's life rather than focusing on the positives. Unfortunately, the number of school counselors available to schools is limited. This is partly due to the lack of incentive to take up this profession. There are few financial or career path opportunity incentives for staff who may aspire to these positions.

#### **7/ The provision of adequate teaching training, both in terms of pre-services and ongoing professional training.**



There is inadequate training in the pre-service area for teachers. Special education is often part of a lecture or it is an elective which means that undergraduates have the option to do something else. These people then enter classrooms where students with diagnosed and undiagnosed disabilities/ disorders sit side by side, vying for the differentiation of the curriculum to cater for their learning styles and needs.

In a similar manner, there are ongoing professional learning opportunities for staff in schools but they are restricted to those who are interested or in a position to be sent by a school. The expectation is that staff return and upskill their colleagues. Many of the areas of disability, including autism and mental health, are difficult to understand due to their complexity and therefore much more difficult to pass the information on to peers.

### **8/ Other related matters.**

School Learning Support teams have been promoted as the mechanism to engage staff and families in the provision of a quality service supporting students with disabilities in the classroom and the school. Unfortunately, there appears to be a gap in the level of usage of these teams in schools. Reports vary from teams that are inclusive and active within the school to schools who are unaware of the function and/ or role of these teams. There needs to be more work done on promoting and using these teams to ensure that families are informed, included and listened to when any and all decisions are being made within the school. Part of this may involve staff training and development including of the school executive. As with most committees within a school, the success is often dependent on the value placed on these teams by the school executive. This may include specific timing of meetings and a willingness by the Executive to be part of the team, to allocate time within the week/ term to conduct meetings/ reviews.

It would be interesting to determine the value that the Department of Education and Training Regions (DET) place on these teams and the mechanism they have for supporting schools to attain a level of competence in conducting meetings and involving families in the process. One of the problems in the past has been the 'rubber stamp' nature of some teams in which parents are asked to sign papers but have not participated in any of the processes due to limited meeting planning to cater for parental work and home commitments. There is some suggestion that there is no consistency between DET Regions.

Early Identification and the associated support mechanisms that are available would have to be a priority in addressing the needs of the child. This allows not only the child but also the family to engage in the learning environment as early as possible and, if handled sensitively, allows more engagement. While there has been a push for more preschool settings to be developed to ensure all children have access to these settings for at least 15 hours per week in the 12 months prior to attending school, there does not appear to be a similar push to increase the number of early intervention programs. These early intervention programs have a more specific emphasis on identifying and addressing the needs of students who would struggle in the mainstream classroom due to their disability. At present, language and autism appear to be the main issues which lead families to seek an early intervention placement but developmental and behavioural issues are also of concern. In areas where there have been successful programs, the transition from preschool to school has been much smoother and the parent/ school relationship has benefitted from the process.