

**Submission  
No 688**

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

**Organisation:** Colyton High School Trade School P&C Association

**Date received:** 4/03/2010

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# NSW LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL INQUIRY INTO THE PROVISION OF EDUCATION TO STUDENTS WITH A DISABILITY OR SPECIAL NEEDS

## SUBMISSION

The Inquiry is requesting submissions from the public that address some or all of the following terms of reference. You are invited to detail your views, examples and recommendations for improvement in the spaces provided (*copy additional forms if more space is required*).

Please indicate if you would like your submission kept confidential.

NB: Not all terms of reference need be addressed.

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

Parents should not be forced to prove time and time again (every 12-24 months), that their child has a disability. Once diagnosed, it should be enough! Parents, grandparents and carers are constantly chasing doctor's reports and disability confirmation reports.

Many students in mainstream classes are just above the "IM" or "IO" cut off mark, (within 1 or 2 points). These students do not receive disability or special needs funding – but, if there are a large number of these students in a class then the job of the teacher is made even harder as they try to cater for the learning needs of the other students in the class.

School Learning Support Officers (SLSO's) can assist the teacher by working with these students as well as the funded student/s.

There are many students who have a disability that is displayed through violent behaviour, often resulting in suspension from school. These students are often disadvantaged because they are not permitted to return to school until they have a new or updated diagnosis (which can take considerable time if a parent is awaiting a specialist appointment), have an updated medical management plan or a current / updated risk assessment plan.

Not all disabilities fall into the "funded" category. For example, Irlene's Syndrome is not considered for funding. Support for such students falls directly on the school and can amount to considerable financial and "time" support being given by the school staff in having textbooks and schoolwork reproduced on a certain colour paper, as a voice recording etc.

All students in Australia, regardless of their capabilities, have the right to a quality education.

### 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.

Children are assessed by a School Counsellor or relevant professional and if educational problems occur as a result of the disability funding may be granted. One major problem area is that professional services are unavailable to some families, or that some parents will not take advantage of these services –as they do not want their child/ren to be "labelled" as having a disability.

Health professionals e.g. speech and occupational therapists, should be employed on staff (especially in areas of socio- economic difficulty), to generate individual programs for students with special needs or a disability that can be supported by parents, teachers and SLSO's.

Perhaps there could be another category in the special needs spectrum for those students who do not fit into the IM, IO range but who need more from a teacher than a mainstream student does?

These students obviously need the support of a SLSO to keep them abreast of the work the rest of their class is undertaking. There are many more of these students in our schools and more funding is required so that these students can be given a better opportunity to learn and progress in life.

What price dignity?

What price human rights?

What price a functional society?

Disadvantaged students – those with a disability or requiring special needs care **MUST** be looked after and advocated for by us (as a whole community), as they are not often able to advocate for themselves.

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

Support unit classes are full and overflowing. Students with behavioural, emotional and mental health issues within mainstream classes are poorly funded under the current circumstances.

Current funding formulas do not meet the needs of these students.

The current sizes of the support classes need to be decreased, while the ratio of student / teacher/ school learning support officers needs to be increased.

There appears to be a huge gap the provision of services for IM students in the mainstream courses. These students need funding support, in conjunction with Individual Learning Plans (IEP's), to enable teachers and SLSO's to deliver a more systematic and repetitive style of learning as well as targeting outcomes relevant to their future life needs. At present parents are expecting a service that cannot be delivered as this funding is completely absent.

Parents awaiting placement for their child in a special education setting, for example, a Behavioural School, Tutorial Centre, PCYC placement or Mental Health placement, currently have to wait for years to have their son/daughter signed off for one of these placements as there just aren't enough places available! This waiting time impacts on other students (and staff) while the child remains in the mainstream classroom.

There are insufficient such places available at present – the need for additional places is urgent! Better forms of protection need to be established where students with a tendency toward violent behaviour are left in mainstream or support unit classrooms. Students and staff need to know that they are safe when they are at school.

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

School counsellors have a key role in assessing the need and the coordination of services for students with a disability or special needs. These needs are often on a contingency basis and are frequently of an urgent nature. As such counsellor allocation formulae should be enhanced to enable daily counsellor coverage at more high schools.

School Counsellors, in this technological age, should have access to completely computerised information and testing systems – the current paper filing and testing system is too slow, too cumbersome and totally inadequate for the needs of the modern, mobile needy child/ren. Students who have a diagnosis of an Intellectual Disability should be able to access support classes from Year 1 – not have to wait until they are in Year 3 (as is the case at present). Why wait and waste those precious early years?

Children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms require the assistance of School Learning Support Officers (SLSO) as well as their classroom teacher.

At present the average funded student is able to access the SLSO for approximately 1-3 hours per week, with highly funded students receiving approx 1-2 hours per day. This puts extreme pressure (mentally, physically and emotionally), on the teacher, the student and the SLSO, as well as the other students in the class.

SLSO's employed in mainstream classroom situations are employed as casual / temporary staff, on a year to year basis. Many SLSO's have been employed by the DET as "long term temporary staff" for 10 years or more in the same school.

The vast majority of our students with a disability or special needs have remained in the one school from Year 7 enrolment until the completion of their education (Graduating in Year 10 or Year 12).

Continuity is imperative for students with special needs and disabilities – SLSO's in the mainstream setting should be permanent employees of the Department of Education and Training.

More opportunities should be made available during the high school years for work experience. Providing students with disabilities who are in mainstream classes with a variety of options will enable them to make decisions in the future as to what they could be doing for the rest of their lives – don't send them to the same place time after time. Relationships with businesses need to be developed to enable the necessary variety of work placement venues.

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

Modified curriculums and Life Skills patterns of study are imperative rights for students with intellectual disabilities and special needs.

Support classes should not be diminished as they provide a necessary alternative to mainstream classes for students with a disability or special needs.

Conduct disordered students are often better off with modified and alternative curriculum and lesson plans. They often benefit from and prefer, smaller group settings to work in and often a more physical or hands on environment, this enables them to achieve better outcomes than they would normally achieve.

Technology can also benefit these students as they could for example, present their work on a computer, voice record or even film their answers and responses.

Will there be the provision of a "National Life Skills" program of study under the proposed new "National Curriculum"?

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

Families and students from low socio – economic status environments have limited access to ongoing support services. They may receive 2 or 3 free or reduced cost sessions with a health professional (speech pathologist, counsellor, family therapist etc).

At the completion of these sessions they often cannot afford to pay for additional or ongoing treatments. This makes the continuity of treatment extremely difficult and in many cases, impossible. It may also take families years to get a diagnosis, particularly where there are multiple disabilities or special needs.

These families often cannot afford the medications and prosthetics that their children require. This can impact not only the child themselves but others around them. If a student is not taking his/her

necessary medication everyone in the classroom with them is impacted.

This is where the SLSO's play an important role. The SLSO often knows the student better than the teacher, as they see them in a variety of settings and can often predict and diffuse situations and problems before they can become an issue in the classroom – both mainstream and support unit. School based Occupational Therapy and Speech Therapy is essential. It would be of huge benefit to many students and their families if they were able to access different therapies whilst at school. This would enable the teachers involved to work with the different therapists, e.g.; speech or behavioural therapists, at school, in a unified approach, to help the student achieve their best. By doing this the student would not have to waste valuable learning time by having time away from school.

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

University students undertaking a teaching degree (particularly Early Childhood and Primary), should undertake some Occupational Therapy training, e.g.; how to correctly hold a pencil and fine motor exercises.

Most teaching degrees have very limited references / topics for Special Education / Special Needs students. There does not seem to be adequate provision for any practical or hands on contact and experience in dealing with students with a disability or special needs in the mainstream classroom setting for most graduate teachers. This is also often the case for the older and more experienced teachers who is now being exposed to a broader range of disabilities and special needs students than they had been previously.

Teachers need to be provided with the training and skills to be able to identify, understand and manage the behaviours of students with special needs or disabilities who may be distressed or feel threatened in a classroom situation. Often situations arise where the student may be at risk of harming themselves, staff or other classmates. Staff should be provided with relevant training and knowledge of different techniques, to enable them to identify potential triggers and better manage the protection of *a//* the students in their care.

Many teachers often have more than one student in their class/es that have special needs or a disability, sometimes even multiple diagnoses. Both, mainstream classrooms and support unit classes regularly contain any number of students with ADHD, ADD, OCD, ODD, Autism Spectrum Disorders- such as Asberger's Syndrome, Mental Health Diagnosis and Intellectual Disabilities.

This combined range of needs can be extremely challenging and often confronting for teachers, STLA's and SLSO's, as well as the other students in the class.

Neither the funding for, nor the training available to staff is adequate.

#### 8. Any other related matters.

With the raising of the school leaving age to 17 there will be an increasing number of students with disabilities and special needs requiring even more assistance and special provisions from teaching staff, Support Teachers Learning Assistance (STLA's) and SLSO's.

There will be significantly more students needing to undertake Life Skills patterns of study, therefore requiring staff to implement modified and adjusted lessons and assessment tasks. More time will be needed for instruction and understanding of the curriculum and student outcomes.

The current ratio of 1 school counsellor per 500 students is totally inadequate, particularly in lower SES areas, where the levels of students with special needs appears to be higher than in the more affluent areas. Low SES areas are seeing a generational increase in students with learning difficulties, special needs and disabilities.

Name:

Address:

Telephone No.

Date: 2/3/2010

*(Please tick)*

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|------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Parent    | <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Principal | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify) |

***If you are making a submission on behalf of an organisation, please indicate who has authorised it, for example, the executive committee, president or chairperson.***

Organisation: Colyton High School Trade School P&C Association

Authorised by: Teresa Gordon (P&C President)

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