

INQUIRY INTO TRANSITION SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH ADDITIONAL OR COMPLEX NEEDS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Organisation: Catholic Education Commission

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CATHOLIC EDUCATION COMMISSION NEW SOUTH WALES

ABN 33 266 477 369
PO Box A169, Sydney South NSW 1235
Level 9, 133 Liverpool Street, Sydney NSW 2000
Telephone: (02) 9287 1555 Fax: (02) 9264 6308

Email: commission@cecsw.catholic.edu.au Website: <http://www.cecsw.catholic.edu.au>

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS WITH ADDITIONAL AND COMPLEX NEEDS

A. BACKGROUND

The Catholic Education Commission (CEC NSW) is the body responsible to the Catholic Bishops of NSW/ACT for both the coordination and representation of NSW Catholic schools at the State level. The Commission also provides leadership in Catholic education, through service to dioceses, religious congregations and parents. It functions through consultation with Diocesan Directors and Religious Institutes, as well as with Principal and parent associations. However, the Commission has no role in the day to day management of NSW Catholic Schools. Responsibility for the direct management of Catholic schools in New South Wales rests with a range of Catholic Schools Authorities.

There are 11 separate diocesan school systems, each with a Catholic Education Office/Catholic Schools Office. There are also 47 independent Catholic schools owned and operated by Religious Congregations. Catholic schools in their mission have always endeavoured to welcome and show a special care not only for the financially poor or marginalised but a larger group of students disadvantaged in various ways. Catholic schools seek to enhance the wellbeing, spiritual development and dignity of each child.

In NSW there are currently (2010) 583 Catholic schools, including 7 Special Schools, enrolling a total of 240,983 students. Of these students 10,907 are Students with Disabilities (SWDs). Catholic Special Schools currently enrol 483 students. 18,250 teachers are employed by NSW Catholic schools. In addition 7,395 non-teaching staff support the educational mission of NSW Catholic schools.

B. APPROACH

The CEC wishes to briefly identify three areas of input to the inquiry. These areas include: "What is Working" and "Barriers to Transition". In addition final comment is made on "Future Action".

(i) What is working

For children with additional needs and their families, the transition to school, between schools and later from school to post school opportunities are times of both opportunity and challenge.

Successful transition to and from school involves interactions between families, specialist support and school staff. All of these interactions need to be coordinated in order to enhance a student's ability to engage in the next stage of their life-long learning.

Collaborative programs and services offered by non- government organisations (such as Cerebral Palsy Alliance, Northcott Society, ASPECT, Shepherd Centre and RIDBC) and government agencies such as ADHC, all supported by Catholic Disability officers, greatly assist to enhance the transition experiences of families. Many of these services are supported by Catholic sector disability support staff.

In recent years transition has been further supported by the development of information packages for families. These packages address processes for school enrolment, as well as ongoing services available to support families. Useful publications include “Steppin’ out”, “On the move” (Human Services; ADHC), Through the Maze (ACD NSW) and “Who's going to teach my child: A guide for parents of students with special learning needs” (DEC NSW).

Current strategies that support positive transitions to school for children and families with additional and complex support needs include processes for cross-sector collaboration. These processes involve communication between all stakeholders with the focus being on the needs of the child. Collaboration can include provision of interpreters when necessary. As a result comprehensive transition plans are implemented within a reasonable period of time prior to a child commencing school or moving between schools. Collaborative planning enables the adaptation to local contexts of services and support, including appropriate access to special transport, staff training, and the assessment of building access issues.

For families with a child or children with special needs, informal support from friends and families is often needed, especially at critical transition points. Critical transition points include: diagnosis or re-assessment, specialist visits and school planning meetings. The availability of parent support groups such as Family Advocacy has proven extremely helpful to parents.

Post-school services and related support programs, have greatly improved the transition from school in recent years.

Successful post school transition services include access to funding programs for Transition to Work and Community Participation as provided by Aging Disability and Home Care (ADHC). Also of significance are associated cross sector training opportunities as well as the National Disability Coordinators (NDCO's) and School Transition Officers.

(ii) What are the barriers to better transition services

A major issue for families is the discontinuity in support that occurs between early intervention pre- school programs and school aged programs. Intervention transition programs are important opportunities for both informal communication with families as well as for assessing the strengths, abilities and support needs of children. The objective is to ensure that appropriate resources are provided in time so as to assist each child to move to the next phase of education or training with his/her peers.

At the commencement of school pre-school programs typically cease and families have to re-learn how to access appropriate educational support. Currently, the nature of support varies from school to school and school system to school system. Also for students with

high support needs certain diagnostic assessments are required in order to gain school targeted support. It is often both difficult for parents to understand and access the types of school level assessment required. Locating specialists who can complete assessments is often a problem. Accessing school related services is a particular challenge for rural families.

When beginning school, key considerations for families include choosing the appropriate school for their child whilst managing the related anxiety as to whether the school community will recognise, and as necessary accommodate, their child's unique qualities. The search for an appropriate school often involves decision making about the most appropriate setting (such as a special school rather than the local parish school.) Parents need assistance with this decision making process and, for their decision making to be meaningful, they require a choice of services.

A related problem is that presently early childhood funding ceases once children access school age services, yet children usually require significant support early in their formal years of schooling. In some cases parents actually delay the commencement of schooling to the mandatory age of six in order to extend pre-school service provision. While this may be a successful short term service support access strategic its long term impacts are problematic.

Access to specific support programs, such as *Brighter Futures* and other services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, behavioural support and parenting support, has improved greatly over recent years. However these services are restricted to certain types of disability and ages (*Brighter Futures* ends at eight years of age). Many programs have limited availability, meaning that the support is only offered for a short block of time, after which families are no longer eligible. As noted access to services is even more difficult in rural areas.

This categorical and institutional approach to the provision of support services itself creates transition points and barriers.

C. FUTURE ACTION

Given that families currently have to negotiate transition points there is a need for professional development in the area of collaborative planning so that schools are able to better engage with medical specialists, therapists, early intervention educators and families. Schools and parents are in need of education about the social and educational implications of each transition event.

Further professional support for early childhood educators is needed to assist with the provision of Early Intervention Services prior to school. Also across the whole continuum of education the provision of services needs to be better synchronised with the changing needs of children so that with appropriate supportive services they will be better able to learn throughout their lives.

Funding should be prioritised and targeted to reduce waiting lists for Community Health Services and other services which offer diagnostic/developmental services. In addition

increased allied health services for school aged children are required. Services which need to be made more accessible include Occupational Therapy and Speech Therapy. In each case the special the needs of both rural areas and non-English speaking families need to be addressed.

It is acknowledged that transition from school to post-school services and related support programs have seen great improvements in recent years. However, transition issues could be further addressed through better supporting services offered by not-for-profit community organisations since these services currently only support a very restricted number of families.

Families who have limited English require greater access to 'educational' interpreters to assist the transition process for those children for whom English is not their first language.

The Catholic Education Commission trusts that this brief overview of key issues will assist the deliberations of the Inquiry. CEC staff would be happy to elaborate matters arising if invited to do so by the Committee.

Ian Baker
Director – Education Policy and Programs
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