

Submission  
No 383

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

**Organisation:** NSW SSP Principals' Network

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**Submission to the Legislative Council  
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**NSW SSP Principals' Network**



**Inquiry into the Provision of  
Education to Students with a  
Disability or Special Needs**

## INTRODUCTION: NSW SSP PRINCIPALS' NETWORK

The NSW SSP Principals' Network (the Network) represents principals in the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) Special Schools across NSW. Principals elect to become members by the payment of a small fee which also provides national membership to the Australian Special Education Principals' Association (ASEPA).

Whilst only a small network, due to the comparatively small number of SSPs, (in comparison to the NSW Primary Principals Association and the NSW Secondary Principals Council), it is the peak organisation to provide professional support and professional learning to SSP Principals. The Network also supports the professional learning of other special education leaders, for example head teachers and assistant principals and special education teachers. The Network advocates on behalf of its members for inclusion on DET committees to represent SSPs when decisions affecting them are being made and for improved services to students in SSPs and other settings.

SSPs cater for students

1. With **intellectual disabilities** (often with other disabilities including autism, physical disabilities, sensory impairments, complex health conditions, behaviour disorders and mental health conditions). Students are grouped according to level of intellectual functioning. Students with severe intellectual disability are labelled IS; students with moderate intellectual disabilities are labelled IO. Many SSPs cater for IO/IS students. A smaller number of schools cater for IM/IO students who usually have behaviour or mental health issues.
2. With **behaviour disorders**. These students may or may not have an intellectual disability in the mild/moderate range (IM/IO). Many students have learning difficulties
3. With **emotional disturbance** and **mental health** conditions
4. In **Juvenile Justice** facilities. These students may or may not have any of the features of students catered for in other SSPs and schools. Many have no disability.
5. In **Hospital Schools**. These students may or may not have any of the features of students catered for in other SSPs and schools

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It is evident from the range of students catered for in SSPs that there is no single issue or no single recommendation that will address all of the issues facing the organisations charged with the responsibility of providing education for students with a disability or special needs.

The Network asked its members to respond via electronic survey to the terms of reference of the inquiry. This submission is a compilation of those responses, providing themes as they emerged. A recommendation/s is included after each term of reference if it was suggested by the membership.

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## RESPONSE TO THE EIGHT TERMS OF REFERENCE

### 1) THE NATURE, LEVEL AND ADEQUACY OF FUNDING FOR THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN WITH A DISABILITY

- Funding and staffing ratios are generally inadequate for students in SSPs as they are based only on the student's primary disability and do not take account of the impact of the complex nature of the disabilities, nor the effect on the student's functioning.
- Funding for the professional learning of staff in SSPs and support classes is inadequate. It does not take into account the funding for professional learning of School Learning Support Officers (SLSOs) who account for half of the staff in SSPs and support classes. Tied funds professional learning funds allocated to schools can only be spent on teachers, so any additional training of SLSOs must come from the school's global budget funds. SSPs spend considerable funds on professional learning for *all* of their staff to meet OHS responsibilities in areas such as manual handling of students, and courses to assist in the safe management of aggressive or violent students (Non Violent Crisis Intervention (NCI); PART). Meeting OHS obligations leaves little funding available to meet the other professional learning priorities related to teaching, learning, curriculum and program development and leadership development.
- Reliance on external assessments such as NAPLAN to drive access to funding for improved results and professional support excludes many SSPs as the assessments are not accessible to students with significant intellectual disabilities.
- Funding for executive release is inadequate as it does not take into account the high levels of support required of these staff in supporting complex student needs, mentoring and supervising staff new to special education settings, assisting teachers to develop individual plans for students, coordinating transport and other services for students etc
- Funding to allow for collaboration with other professionals is non-existent. A multi-disciplinary team approach to student planning and learning produces better outcomes for students, but teachers have no more than the 2 hours

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release from face to face time allocated to all “primary” teachers. Schools must fund release from their global budget allocations or schedule meetings out of school hours.

- Funding is currently inadequate for many students attending SSPs. Many of these students have not been able to have their learning needs met in less restricted school settings, and yet when placed in an SSP due to higher support needs or transferred to an SSP, the funding remains the same (or less for secondary aged students) as it would be in a support unit in a mainstream school.
- SSPs are funded as primary schools despite significant high school aged enrolments. In general, primary schools receive less funding than high schools. Secondary aged students in an SSP are staffed and funded at a lesser level (based on primary school allocation) than the same students attending support classes in high schools. This anomaly reduces the SSP’s base funding and staffing, executive support allocation and teacher preparation time in release from face to face allocation.
- Funding is inadequate to meet the OHS needs of students and staff in SSPs. Attracting funding for equipment such as hoists and slings is becoming increasingly difficult. Funding to support students with challenging behaviours, additional complex health needs etc in SSPs requires ongoing applications that often is short term in duration and inadequate in amount. Students with significant and complex disabilities may have challenging behaviours or health care requirements that require long term, sustained support, not a short term funding fix. Despite good teaching and staff trained in course such as PART and NCI, staff continue to sustain injuries due to inadequate funding/ staffing levels.
- The physical environments in SSPs are often not purpose built to meet the safety, personal/health care and learning needs of its students. Significant capital funding is needed to be allocated to SSPs to ensure safe learning environments.
- The expectation that teachers and SLSOs can meet every need of a student with a disability without the funded support of other professionals such as therapists, psychologists etc is unreasonable and negatively affects the learning potential of students.

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- Funding for the integration of students back into mainstream schools is inadequate, particularly for students with emotional disturbance or behaviour disorders. Funding needs to address the coordination of services as well as the individual needs of students. Some students require longer term placement in an SSP
- For students enrolling in kindergarten are unable to be assessed due to the severity of the disability, they should automatically be staffed/funded at the highest level (IS) rather than the lower level (IO).until the true functioning level can be determined.
- No adjustment has been made to class size of kindergarten classes in SSPs despite a class size reduction in mainstream schools. Early intervention is vital to students reaching their full potential.

**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**

- Funding for students should be based on the students' functioning level rather than the PRIMARY disability. This would include taking into account the impact of the primary disability and any other contributing factors or disabilities including communication needs, physical needs, medical needs, sensory needs, autism, behavioural needs, mental health needs etc. For example, two students both labelled and funded as having a severe intellectual disability can have very different support needs. One student may be able to learn effectively in a group of three students with the support of one adult, whilst another student may not even be able to be maintained safely in a classroom without the regular attention and support of one or two adults, due to extreme challenging behaviour. The current staffing ratios result in regular injuries of staff and students, lost learning time as students cannot engage in learning activities without high levels (often 1:1) support, lost learning time as students have their personal care needs attended to.
- Functional assessment needs to be objective and comprehensive of everything that is impacting on a student's capacity to learn. Funding needs to be increased rather than re-labelled and reallocated in a way that is still inadequate.
- Staffing schools based on a student's functioning and factor of need is useful if assessments are broad enough to capture the impact of the various disabilities and special needs, timely, and adequate resources are then allocated to meet those identified needs.
- The determination of a student's support levels needs comprehensive assessment by a team of people with adequate time and resources allocated to the task – not just one more thing added to the already overloaded teacher, executive, school counsellor and principal. The "sign off" on a student's funding/staffing level needs to be long term in cases where a student's disability and support needs are obviously long term.



**3) THE LEVEL AND ADEQUACY OF CURRENT SPECIAL EDUCATION PLACES WITHIN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM**

- Inadequate placement for students with mental health disabilities. Many students' families do not have adequate access to diagnosis and services. Placement cannot occur without a diagnosis. Students are sometimes placed in support classes not catering to their disability due to lack of mental health placements. These children do not always "get better" so more longer term placements are required. Many students remain in mainstream classes without any or adequate support.
- Mental health issues are having a huge impact on the educational opportunities and outcomes for all students, those affected by these health problems and those in the same classes. We need, as a system, more facilities operated jointly by health and education such as Rivendell.
- Placements are inadequate. Despite additional classes being established in some areas, demand is outstripping supply.
- SSPs having extra classes "established" often on short notice and without adequate infrastructure planning and provision, nor adequate resources to meet the needs of new staff etc.
- Demand for trained and experienced staff is ever increasing. Demand outstrips supply.
- There is a lack of emotional disturbance (ED) & behaviour disorder (BD) services and a lack of coordination of these services. An example of this lack of coordination is an SSP meant to cater for BD students between year 5 and year 8, but there is nowhere in the area that caters for BD students post year 8. Some of these students may then get an ED sign-off or have nowhere to go if they cannot be sustained in a mainstream school.
- There are inadequate placements for students with autism, early intervention places, and mental health disorders. Students with intellectual disabilities are, in some regions, waiting until 5 to 6 years of age for a placement in an SSP or support class. SSPs in the past regularly enrolled 4 year olds.

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- The increase in the school leaving age to 17 is likely to have an impact on the demand for placements in SSPs catering for ED/BD students.
- Support for schools to maintain students in mainstream schools and support classes in mainstream schools is vital if the increasing demand for SSP placements is to be curbed. SSPs are recognised for excellent educational provision.
- Inadequate places for students to be placed after hospitalisation whether temporary or permanent

**4) THE ADEQUACY OF INTEGRATED SUPPORT SERVICES FOR CHILDREN WITH A DISABILITY IN MAINSTREAM SETTINGS, SUCH AS SCHOOL CLASSROOMS**

- SSPs can assume that the services in mainstream schools are inadequate as many students are referred to SSPs from mainstream schools with support classes.
- Many students are referred to SSPs in year 7 as high schools appear to be unable to meet the students' support needs.
- Commonwealth funding to support the integration of students in SSPs to support units is grossly inadequate.
- Concern about the Learning Support Coordinator model due to inadequate training and experience. Expectation of one person to be "an expert" across a wide range of disabilities and special learning needs. Concern about the loss of specific expertise in school
- Inadequate professional learning and support for teachers and SLSOs
- Inadequate time to consult with other teachers and professionals to plan and deliver individual programs
- Inadequate support in terms of curriculum developed or adjusted to meet the learning needs of students with intellectual disabilities, particularly significant intellectual disabilities. Unreasonable demand on teacher and executive time.
- Inadequate training for staff in the effective use of SLSO support (if a reasonable amount has been allocated)
- Inadequate facilities for students in many settings, whether mainstream or SSP
- Greater support needed for students with special needs to promote their learning and reduce lost learning time for peers
- Lack of understanding of what is required and resources to support ED/BD students when they return to mainstream settings.
- Lack of school counsellor time to support students. Time is often used completing assessment and applications for support.

**5) THE PROVISION OF A SUITABLE CURRICULUM FOR INTELLECTUALLY DISABLED AND CONDUCT DISORDERED STUDENTS**

- SSP Network does not want to see a separate curriculum, rather one that lives up to the rhetoric of “inclusivity”. The curriculum is NOT inclusive of ALL learners. Those with significant intellectual disabilities have been left out. The network has grave concerns about the Australian Curriculum. Neither the Board of Studies nor the DET Curriculum Directorate have provided curriculum that adequately meets the needs of all learners.
- Curriculum must be written for all students. It is not sufficient to ask teachers to “make adjustments”, particularly without any guidelines or framework or time to do the significant amount of work required.
- Life Skills component of secondary curriculum is better than the K-6 Curriculum in meeting the learning needs of students with intellectual disabilities.
- K-6 curriculum does not meet the learning needs of students who are functioning below Early Stage 1. Assessment tools are inadequate. Most students with intellectual disabilities cannot access Best Start or NAPLAN. Their results of assessments such as Best Start may tell the parent that their child needs an individual plan developed, but it does not tell the teacher what should be in the plan of how to make the necessary “learning adjustments”. There is inadequate information available to support consistent assessment of students’ achievements.
- SSPs are constantly adapting and modifying current curriculum in an attempt to have something that meets the learning needs of its students. This places unreasonable demands on the resources of the schools and the time of teachers.
- Juvenile Justice (JJ) Schools often use distance education, but may miss the close off dates, depending on when an offender enters school. There are also issues around fees to TAFE to provide suitable courses.
- Conduct disordered students often access Life skills courses as but this is seen by some as unsuitable as these students do not necessarily have an intellectual disability.

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- There are differing views as to the suitability of curriculum for conduct disordered students. One view is that these students need a vigorous academic curriculum with explicit teaching if students are to be reintegrated in mainstream schools. An alternate view is that CD students require curricula based on interests and talents rather than traditional key learning areas (KLAs).
- Given that all high school aged students, regardless of ability or setting, should be working from secondary curriculum, the resources available to secondary students with a disability in an SSP are not the same as for a secondary student in a mainstream high school setting or support class in a high school. Secondary students in SSPs, particularly those in ED/BD settings, JJ settings do not have access to specialist subject teachers or the schools physical resources such as science labs, TAS facilities.
- No students in SSPs have access to the same staffing levels afforded students in high school (see Term of reference 1)

**6) STUDENT AND FAMILY ACCESS TO PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT SERVICES SUCH AS SPEECH THERAPY, OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY, PHYSIOTHERAPY AND SCHOOL COUNSELLORS**

- Inadequate counsellor time to successfully support students, staff and families in achieving positive outcomes for students K-12. School counsellors need to have expertise working with students with complex needs. School counsellor time is rarely sufficient to begin working proactively in schools. Reactive and administrative demands are overwhelming.
- Best practice describes multi-disciplinary teams working with students with significant disabilities. Access to therapists is ad-hoc, inadequate and not ongoing.
- Students can wait literally years for service once a referral has been made to the school aged teams at Aging Disability & Home Care (ADAC) Teachers do not have the expertise to be all things to all students and their families, but this is often the reality.
- A coordinated therapy service, based in SSPs would significantly improve services to students (This was the model used in the 80s and early 90's) Therapists would know their students/clients/ families and much exchange of valuable information would occur between the teaching and therapy staff.
- Clinic models where therapist and other medical professionals come for a defined period to consult and plan has been another suggestion.
- A suggestion to look to the UK as a model where if a therapy service is indicated for a person with a disability, it must be provided. Service here is dependent on demand and availability, often resulting in unreasonable waiting periods or no service at all.
- Providing SSPs with flexible funding to "purchase" the therapy services it requires is another suggested strategy. Rural students and students from poor socio-economic backgrounds are often disadvantaged.
- An increase in therapy services is needed if it is to adequately meet the demands of students in SSP, Support classes and integrated students. Families without the funds for private therapy services often miss out.

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- Even when some therapy services are available, there is no provision of time allocated to the school to allow for meaningful collaboration with these services. Learning Support Teams in schools should be working with these other professionals but learning support teams are in reality, just one more staff meeting jammed into an already time deficient week with no resource time allocated to schools to support and implement any recommendations

**7) THE PROVISION OF ADEQUATE TEACHER TRAINING, BOTH IN TERMS OF PRE-SERVICE AND ONGOING PROFESSIONAL TRAINING**

- Pre service training is still inadequate. Universities should make better use of the expertise in SSPs when training students. All teachers need more training in effective teaching in literacy, managing behaviour, working with students with autism etc
- Ongoing training for teachers is inadequate. Professional learning funds do not adequately cover the training needs of teachers requiring specialist special education training.
- SLSOs receive no targeted professional learning funding for training and yet are required to strongly support the work of teachers and support students with incredibly complex disabilities and challenging behaviours. Having a “mum off the street” does not always meet the demands of the job, although many do an outstanding job.
- Even after post-graduate training in special education, the expertise required by a teacher working with a student with a complex mental health diagnosis or behaviour disorder is not interchangeable with a teacher with expertise working with students with severe intellectual disabilities.
- To expect a teacher to work as a learning support coordinator and to adequately support all types of students in mainstream settings with 110 hours of online learning is not acknowledging the ongoing professional learning required by teachers to remain current in a discrete area of special education.
- New teachers appointed to SSPs require significant support from experienced teachers and executive staff. More time needs to be allocated for this to effectively occur. SSPs could share their expertise with surrounding schools more effectively if time/funding was allocated for this purpose.
- There is a view that new teachers should not be initially appointed to behaviour settings and that teachers should maintain contact with or return to mainstream settings.
- There is a view that post graduate training could become more specialised, so that those interested teaching students with intellectual disabilities could



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specialise in that as could teachers interested in teaching students with behavioural or mental health disorders.

8) **ANY OTHER RELATED MATTERS**

- Increase need for specially trained teachers. Many vacancies filled with untrained staff
- SSPs are sometimes viewed as a “last option”. All officers in the DET need to become familiar with the exceptional work done and should promote SSPs as an alternate school setting providing quality learning for complex students.
- Resources in SSPs and other settings need to address the OHS risks and the learning needs of students if students with disabilities and special needs are to reach their potential.
- Provision of funding to give all SSPs the continuing upgrades, training and ICT resources to meet individual learning needs
- Students with special needs have just that – special needs. Curriculum needs to be flexible enough to accommodate the learning needs of all students. Resources need to match the requirements of the students.
- SSPs and other special education services need adequate resources. Staff need to have the resources available to them so that the culture that it is expected that staff in SSPs get hit, kicked, bitten, scratched, spat upon etc on a regular basis becomes a thing of the past.
- **Despite the evident need for systemic improvement, SSPs provide an outstanding educational service to students with disabilities in NSW. With a truly inclusive curriculum, improved staffing to meet the all of the special needs of its students, facilities that meet the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century learners and the ongoing goodwill of principals and executive, teachers, SLSOs and other school support staff, the provision of education for students with a disability or special needs can only improve.**