

Submission
No 387

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

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SUBMISSION

to

NSW General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2 Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs

The Macarthur Disability Network (MDN) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2 inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs. The MDN aims to:

- unite people with disabilities, carers and service providers to share information, identify, discuss and act on issues of concern;
- work towards raising the capacity of the community within the Macarthur region to deal with issues concerning people who have a disability and those who support them;
- establish better links and improve coordination between services;
- provide a forum for the community to lobby government and non-government bodies for service provision, expansion and improvement for people with disabilities and their carers.

The MDN has a membership base of over 100 people representing over 75 disability services and/or disability specialists in local and state government agencies from across the 3 local government areas of Macarthur, people with a disability and carers and representatives from the education sector. Members of the MDN have identified a range of issues relevant to this inquiry; these are detailed below.

The issues raised in this submission also reflect comments made through consultation with the Macarthur Autism Spectrum Family Support Group which has a membership of 58 families living in the Macarthur region with children in both the public and Catholic education systems.

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

- The child/ teacher ratio needs to be reconsidered and made in line with disability service levels such as day program ratios
- Students face difficulties in getting ready access to funding for assistive technology needs. Students often experience significant delays in access to assistive technology, affecting their full participation in class. This issue is compounded by the additional issue that once assistive technology is

purchased, it does not follow the student through their school and post-school transitions. This can lead to multiple extended periods of time where students are unable to work to their potential due to a lack of suitable assistive technology.

- Children with a disability or special needs are assessed for funding in very complex and rigid manner. School principals report that “securing funds/support for special needs/disabled students often requires repetitive, time consuming advocacy and paperwork. Support provided may then be inconsistently applied and require re-application at frequent intervals”. This situation impacts on parents and children who often spend lengthy periods of time without any support in mainstream classes.
- The same report by the Principals Forum found that “more than 2,500 disabled/special needs students in NSW government schools receive nil or seriously inadequate levels of funding to address their learning needs and allow them to participate effectively alongside their more able peers”.
- As one parent reports : “Parents are being forced to enrol their child part time at school as the class teachers can not cope without the extra aide/support in the classroom....at (my son’s school) I know of a few children (including mine) where this is the case. only last week I was told of a young boy in year 6 who is diagnosed HFA and he has completed Kindergarten to year 6 being a part time student...the Department of Education states that all children are entitled to a full time education, no matter their abilities. Unfortunately a part time enrolment too often seems to be the only alternative the school can offer when the support is not there”.
- Current funding allocations do not take into account multiple disabilities. Children with multiple disabilities require a holistic support approach according to their individual need and may require specialised teaching as well as various forms of assistive technology to enable them to fully participate in learning. At present this does not occur. Students are only funded for the ‘dominant’ impairment, hence a child with an intellectual disability who also has a vision impairment may not receive funding to acquire visual aids to also assist with learning activities.

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.

- In discussions with the Public Schools Principals Forum it is the view of their collective that allocations should be focused on each student’s functioning capacity rather than their disability type or level. This view is also reflected in consultation with parents.

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

- The level and adequacy of current special education places within the education system at present does not meet demand. The 2005/2009 closure of more than 80 IM support classes across NSW has resulted in a concentration of students with multi disability types in the remaining IM classes. Furthermore, throughout this period there has been an increase in the student enrolment ceiling in IO classes, from 9 to 10. Over 800 school principals have reported that the prescribed, fixed formulae for enrolments resulted in inadequate funding, resourcing and support for their students with special needs.
- A member of the Autism Spectrum Family Support Group wrote that her son "is finally in an Autism Support Unit with a Special Needs teacher and an aide, in a class of 7 children (5 Yr 7, 1 Yr 8 and 1 Yr 9)... it is very far from home but it is the closest to us, and Daniel needs to leave home by 6:50am and gets home at about 4.30pm. Fortunately for me, he doesn't mind, but I do think it is ridiculous that places for these children are so few and the number of ASUs so little, it is just an inadequate situation, considering the rising number of children being diagnosed".
- Feedback from a significant number of parents indicates that many children with high support needs have been kept within main stream classes and placed on lengthy waiting lists to access support or special education classes.

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

- Students with disability are under-recognised within the mainstream system. For example, dyslexia is not currently recognised as a disability by the NSW Department of Education and Training. This is despite dyslexia being covered by the definition of disability under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, and the significant impact of learning disabilities such as dyslexia on students' educational outcomes.
- Students who participate in the "Learning Assistance Program" (LAP) within mainstream education are often unaware of why they are involved in this program. These students with 'learning difficulties', and their families, do not receive a full explanation of the reasons they are placed into this program, and do not have any formal documentation of their 'difficulty'. By avoiding the use of the word 'disability' within this program, many students leave school unaware that they would be eligible for support in post-school education settings due to their learning disability. They also leave school without the necessary documentation to be able to apply for such support.

- There is insufficient linkage between secondary education providers and post-secondary education providers regarding transition of students with disability, who do not have a Disability Confirmation Sheet, into higher education and vocational education and training. This is particularly the case for mainstream students with disabilities who may have an undiagnosed disability, chronic medical condition, or a learning disability not recognised by the Department of Education. Effective networks are in place in the Macarthur region between Support Teachers (Transition), Aging, Disability and Home Care post-school program providers, Disability Employment Network providers, and National Disability Coordination Officers. However the transition from school to post-secondary education is often poorly coordinated for mainstream students without a Disability Confirmation Sheet. National Disability Coordination Officers seek to offer information, referral and transition support to these students, however can find it difficult to gain entry to, and locate these students within schools. Many mainstream education providers are unaware of the broad range of disabilities that are entitled to support in post-secondary settings, and may therefore unintentionally 'gate keep', making it difficult for these students to receive relevant transition planning information and support.
- There is insufficient transition planning and preparation of school leavers with disability who do not have a Disability Confirmation Sheet. Many of these students, who may have a chronic medical condition, undiagnosed disability, or learning disability not recognised by the Department of Education, leave school unaware of the support and reasonable adjustments they are entitled to receive in post-school education, training and employment. Many are unaware of their rights and have not considered important issues around disclosure of their disability. Disability support staff in further education settings report that many students only present to disability services after poor academic performance leads to them being at risk of failing their course. With appropriate support from commencement, many of these students would not be in this situation and therefore could have a better chance of successfully completing their post-school qualifications.

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

- Lack of behaviour intervention and support plans in the school setting, and resources to support implementation of plans that are in place
- Use of mainstream consequences such as suspension on children with disabilities actually escalates the behaviours. None the less, too often this is being utilised to give teachers a break. This places enormous pressure on

the family unit, particularly if the parents both work and is particularly difficult within one parent families trying to juggle work and carer commitments.

- Members of the MDN have dealt with many cases of parents being forced to stay at home to look after a child who has been suspended or placed on part time attendance to school such as half days.
- Mainstream curriculum needs to be reviewed for children with functional and cognitive levels which are very low.
- Special Behaviour Schools need to be funded at high school levels. Currently, they are dumping grounds for children with challenging behaviours. These schools are under resourced both physically and at human resource levels. Very few specialised teachers, no therapy access and no facilities such as science laboratories are available. In these schools, children do not have access to regular mainstream curriculum and are placed at a further disadvantage from their peers in main stream schools. There is evidence that children in these schools do not have re integration plans back to mainstream schools so they stay until they reach minimum age for leaving. These children very often end up as long term unemployed, drug or alcohol dependant or in the jail system.

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

- Integrated support for children with special needs is minimal or non existent. Specialised staff such as school counsellors, speech and/or occupational therapists are rarely available to assist students and their families.
- Many schools in our region do not have school counsellors or minimal support from counsellors working within a ratio of one counsellor to 1,500 students.

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

- Limited understanding of how to work with students with disabilities
- There are not enough specialised Teacher's Aides trained in working with children with special needs nor are there enough Special Education Teachers in the school system.
- Training in dealing with challenging behaviours is not sufficiently available to teachers and teacher's aides.

8. Any other related matters.

The Macarthur Disability Network fully support the recommendations by the Public Schools Principals Forum (PSPF) made in their report dated March 2009 entitled 'Provision of Services for Special Needs/Disabled Students In NSW'. These being:

- The NSW government and Department of Education and Training (DET) fulfil their legal responsibility to provide appropriate levels of funding and resources to ensure that all disabled/special needs children, whether in special or regular classes, have the opportunity of reaching their full potential.
- The NSW DET introduce a flexible model of staffing to support special classes and schools establishing enrolment ceilings on the basis of the functioning levels of students rather than fixed formulae.
- The NSW DET commence urgent recruitment and planning to increase the number of school counsellors so that students have access to therapy and counselling opportunities. A counsellor to pupil ratio reduction from 1:1500 to 1:800 is recommended.
- The NSW DET diagnose and recognise the multiple disabilities of each student and provide appropriate support based on the students' overall capacity to function in the classroom setting.

Furthermore, we recommend the following:

- The NSW DET conducts an urgent review of funding levels to special schools such as Behaviour to address the funding inadequacies and under resourcing faced by these schools and their students.

In summary, members of the MDN and all parents in the Macarthur Autism Spectrum Family Support Group recommend that the State Government and DET to quickly address the current situation of:

- insufficient funding support for students with special needs in all school settings.
- a lack of special education placements.
- failing to fund smaller class sizes (mainstream, support units and special schools) to address the special education needs of students.
- inadequate professional learning opportunities and curriculum support.
- inadequate support in areas such as STLA, school counsellor allocations, physiotherapy, and occupational and speech therapy.