

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

**Organisation:** Charles Sturt University

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12 August 2011

Social Issues Committee  
Parliament House  
Macquarie Street  
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Sir/Madam

**Submission to the Inquiry into transition support for students with additional or complex needs and their families**

Please find enclosed a submission to this Inquiry, from the Educational Transitions and Change research group, Research Institute for Professional Practice, Learning and Education, Charles Sturt University. As well, please find enclosed a copy of the report *Facilitating children's transition to school from families with complex support needs*, a project recently completed by the research group. Please note that we are the leaders of the research group and have the authority to make this submission on the group's behalf.

We value the invitation to contribute to this inquiry and would be interested in assisting you further as appropriate.

Yours sincerely

Professors Sue Dockett  
Charles Sturt University

Professor Bob Perry  
Charles Sturt University

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**Professors Sue Dockett and Bob Perry**

**Charles Sturt University**

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# Submission to the Inquiry into transition support for students with additional or complex needs and their families

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## **Summary**

The transition to school is a time of opportunity – a time of change as children start school and as families seek and are responsive to intervention. It is also a time of vulnerability, where children and families move from known contexts and supports to unknown contexts, often without continuity of support and with the need to access different services, different people and different experiences. Recognising the strengths that children and families bring with them to school, using these as the basis for promoting positive engagement at school and maintaining a network of coordinated support delivered by well-qualified professionals will do much to build on the opportunities and reduce the vulnerabilities encountered.

## Background

This submission is based on recent research undertaken in NSW which focused on the transition to school of children from families with complex support needs. While the research focused on families, over half of the children who made the transition to school during the course of the project had an identified special education need or combination of needs. In summary, this research involved 44 families with complex support needs; within these families, 26 children were identified as having special education needs.

This research is reported in the document (attached) *Facilitating children's transition to school within families with complex support needs*<sup>1</sup>. (In this submission the document will be referred to as the Report.) The research was funded through an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant, led by Charles Sturt University in partnership with University of Western Sydney, Mission Australia and Community Services, NSW Department of Human Services.

The research from which the Report is drawn was undertaken in diverse areas of NSW during 2006-2009. It explored the experiences of families with complex support needs around the transition to school. The Report identifies the aspirations of participating families for their children and the practices and supports that make positive engagement with education possible. Of particular relevance to the inquiry, this research explored what supports are required, available and accessible for these families and their children during the year before school and their first year of school.

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<sup>1</sup> Dockett, S. Perry, B. Kearney, E. Hampshire, A. Mason, J. Schmied, V. (2011). *Facilitating children's transition to school from families with complex support needs* Albury: Research Institute for Professional Practice, Learning and Education, Charles Sturt University.

This submission draws on the Report and other research conducted by two of the authors, Bob Perry and Sue Dockett. Professors Perry and Dockett have researched the area of transition to school since 1997. They are regarded as national and international experts in the field, have published widely and are respected by both practitioners and researchers for their contributions.

Over recent years, Professors Dockett and Perry have concentrated their work on transition to school for children and families who are often described as 'vulnerable' or 'disadvantaged'. This work is framed around notions of 'complex support needs' rather than vulnerability or disadvantage, as a way of recognising that families demonstrate a range of strengths at the same time as they experience challenges.

This submission addresses each of the terms of reference of the Inquiry with a series of policy recommendations, based on evidence from the Report.

## **Context**

Families with complex support needs are those experiencing multiple challenges related to children, parents or the whole family. These could encompass poverty, unemployment, ill health, substance abuse, experiences of violence or trauma, poor educational outcomes, truancy, behavioural problems, isolation and/or responding to family members with disabilities or special education needs (Katz, Spooner, & valentine, 2007).

Points of transition provide opportunities to establish patterns of interaction and support. The transition to school is a time when interactions between schools and families set the pattern for ongoing involvement in education. The research base around transition to school provides clear evidence that:

- transition to school is an important time for children and families. A positive start to school sets the scene for ongoing positive interactions between families, children and school (Alexander & Entwisle, 1998; Duncan et al., 2007);
- positive family engagement in school is an important element in promoting children's positive educational outcomes (Henderson & Mapp, 2002);
- many families do not actively engage with schools, for a wide range of reasons. Lack of engagement does not necessarily reflect lack of interest. Rather, many families are willing to be involved with schools, but are not confident of either their role or the value ascribed to this (Bernard van Leer Foundation, 2007; Brooker, 2003).

For all children and families, the transition to school is a time of both opportunity and vulnerability: opportunities for new and different interactions, in different contexts and with different expectations; vulnerability as new and different relationships need to be built, and



contexts managed. All of this occurs in the broader context of new and/or different levels of support. For some families, the transition to school also sees the withdrawal of ongoing support.

## **The adequacy and accessibility of appropriate support for children and their families.**

Support for families with complex support needs is both formal and informal. For many families, the informal support of family and friends was an important addition to the more formalised support sought through agencies and organisations. Informal support, can however, be judgemental and negative. It can be unavailable when families are socially or geographically isolated. More formal support that is professional, ongoing and complementary is valued greatly by families. This type of support is also the most difficult to access.

The availability and accessibility of support varies considerably across communities. Within the research, families sought support from the partner organisations (Mission Australia and the Department of Human Services), as well as other government and non-government organisations. The forms of support sought and offered varied considerably, but included financial support, specialist support, such as speech, occupational or physiotherapy for specific family members, parenting support, medical intervention and crisis support.

The Report notes the following:

1. Professional, ongoing and complementary supports are valued greatly by families but difficult to access. Access to appropriate supports was dependent on location and financial resources. In some communities access to professional support was limited and the cost of private support was prohibitive. Even when such services and programs were available, there were long waiting lists. Many programs had limited

availability, so that families could access these for specific periods only, after which they were considered no longer eligible for support.

2. Sometimes programs are directed at specific family members, yet the needs of other family members were not addressed. The family as a unit was rarely the focus of complementary support.
3. There was a distinct shortage of allied health professionals and programs across NSW.
4. Support that was most valued by families addressed their immediate needs **and** helped them develop skills for the future. For example, support that helped families make positive connections with schools was valued, but so too was access to strategies that helped them make such contact on their own in the future.
5. Effective support often involved a professional acting as a mediator, connecting families, services and schools. This was particularly important when families did not have a history of positive interactions with school.
6. Accessing support often involved increased surveillance for families, as well as judgements being made about families. One parent commented that *there's always this thing in the back of your mind that if you're a parent melting down, is someone going to come along and take your children away...*

7. The time of transition to school was characterised by **discontinuity** of services and support. This was the time that targeted prior-to-school programs ceased and when families had to navigate the unfamiliar landscape of school education and school education support. Children and/or families who had been eligible for support prior-to-school were often confused when eligibility for funding changed and children were deemed to be no longer eligible for support. Families were confused that the nature of support varied so considerably between prior-to-school and school settings and that different assessment criteria were used in the allocation of support. This was particularly the case for children with special education needs.
8. At the time of transition to school, some support ceased entirely; in other cases families described being shifted to a new agency or to another waiting list, depending on what support was available and how it was delivered in a specific community.

Results from the research support the following:

### **1. The importance of retaining the provision of support across the transition to school.**

In addition to the transition to school, many families and children experience a transition across support services. The transition through support services is rarely smooth or continuous. The transition across support services causes high levels of anxiety and stress for many families. Parents are forced to *let go* of relationships with trusted services, engage with new services, or even transition to no support services. When children and families

loose support, negative consequences are seen in terms of children's engagement at school, progression, confidence and achievement.

## **2. The most valuable support across the transition to school is complementary and coordinated.**

Many families find it difficult to manage interactions with the various agencies. Where support is contradictory or uncoordinated, parents report feelings of confusion and disempowerment. They value the support of professionals as mediators to assist with their interactions with these complementary supports. Yet there is limited evidence of families accessing coordinated support, unless parents themselves, early intervention teachers or agency staff actively set out to coordinate support services.

## **3. No one form of support suits all families in all contexts.**

The forms of complementary support accessed by families with complex needs vary considerably. No single form of support is appropriate to all families in all contexts. The individual needs and circumstances of families and children determine what supports are required.

## **4. Effective support promotes transdisciplinary, multi-agency collaboration in family centred practice.**

A broad range of agencies and transdisciplinary supports are required to provide effective support for families with complex support needs. Families commonly access early childhood services, playgroups, parenting programs, financial planning, behavioural support and

financial assistance. Many families also require access to speech, occupational or physiotherapy.

However, the involvement of multiple agencies is often problematic because of the different philosophies and approaches of these agencies. Collaboration has the potential to promote the consistency in services and support that families seek. Professional networks can promote cross-sector and cross-service collaboration.

The sources of complexity in the lives of many families do not start with the children. Yet many services are directed at the child, rather than the family. Collective awareness and responsiveness to family strengths, as well as needs, promotes a better understanding of the family context as a whole and facilitates approaches that are family-centred.

## **5. Transition to school programs can provide important support as children and families engage with schools.**

Transition programs provide an opportunity for families and children to build relationships with the school, teachers and peers. As teachers become familiar with children, they are able to implement programs responsive to their individual needs, and enable access to other complementary supports. Effective engagement during transition sets a positive tone and promotes ongoing interactions between staff and parents.



## **Best practice approaches to ensure seamless and streamlined assistance during transitions.**

Several factors are pivotal to facilitating the transition to school for children of families with complex support needs. A well-qualified and diverse workforce, with access to appropriate and ongoing funding, promotes the provision of professional support and resources that can be appropriately targeted towards families at times of transition.

### **Enabling practices**

While practices that supported the positive transition to school of children from families with complex support needs varied according to the family and their context, common elements of enabling practices were that they:

- provided access to information about school;
- assisted in making positive connections with schools;
- promoted the development of family skills and abilities;
- acknowledged transition as a time when families seek, and are responsive to, input; and
- recognised challenges that reside outside the family, for example in the neighbourhood or community.

Key practices identified by families and staff throughout this project were:

- professionals acting as mediators for families in interactions with schools and other services;

- providing information for families about schools, processes for enrolment, services and support available within schools; and
- transition to school programs.

### Enabling processes

Processes that supported the positive transition to school of children from families with complex support needs were those that emphasised:

- continuity of support across the transition to school;
- alignment of funded programs across the transition, including alignment of funding and access to support;
- cross-sector collaboration;
- support that changes as family needs change;
- service flexibility and responsiveness to each family's changing situations;
- adaptation of services and support to local contexts; and
- professional development opportunities for staff.

### Enabling policies

A number of enabling practices and processes contribute to enabling environments. When these are combined with enabling policies, a range of positive outcomes for children, families, educators and other professionals, as well as the community, are identified. In this context enabling policy:

- recognises transition to school as a time of additional stress for families;
- provides access to appropriate transition programs for children and families;



- facilitates the development and implementation of programs that are built on family strengths and responsiveness to these;
- supports programs that promote family-school partnerships;
- retains provisions for support across the transition to school;
- promotes availability of a range of complementary, yet coordinated, supports for families over the transition period;
- facilitates the implementation of flexible and responsive support programs, adapted for family and community contexts;
- recognises the key roles of a professional, multi-disciplinary workforce in supporting families at times of transition; and
- promotes transdisciplinary, multi-agency collaboration in family centred practice.

From this research, best practice to support the transition to school of children from families with complex support needs involved:

- **Strengths-based approaches** which acknowledge not only the challenges faced by families, but also the strengths they bring and the ways in which they engage in capacity building.
- **Family-school partnerships** that generated a sense of working together for the benefit of the children involved. When families felt that they were valued partners in their children's education, they tended to recognise their role in promoting positive educational outcomes for their children. As they engage with the school more, develop strong relationships with school staff and develop a better understanding of what happens at school, they are well placed to regard school as a positive environment for their children. When children see positive relationships between

their family and the school, their perception of school as an important place is enhanced.

- **Flexible and responsive programs of support** that could be adapted for family and community contexts. There was no generic, one-size fits all form of support that was suitable for delivery across all contexts, for all families. In addition, as families change, appropriate support needs to be responsive to these changes. For example, appropriate support for families with children as they start school may well be quite different from support for families with infants or toddlers. Effective support recognises the changing needs of families and is responsive to changing family situations. Further, effective support must take account of the contexts in which it occurs. Failure to account for and respond to local contexts can mean that support is not accessed or not effective.

## **Other related matters.**

### **Transition to school is a time of additional stress for families with complex support needs.**

All families make decisions and encounter issues and concerns as their children start school. What often differs for families with complex support needs is the nature of the choices available for them, the information or resources they access to inform their decisions and the confidence with which they approach decisions. These differences are also related to the nature of the complex support needs experienced by families and the communities in which they live. For families with complex support needs, the transition to school is often a time of additional stress: financial, social and emotional.

### **Families with a child with special education needs.**

Families with a child with special needs are often surprised to find that placement in a special school is not automatic and that additional funded support for their child in school is also not guaranteed. Navigating different systems and requirements, such as visiting schools and having children assessed, results in considerable stress for some families.

### **Workforce Issues.**

A well-qualified workforce that can deliver professional support and resources is critical to facilitating the transition to school of children from families with complex support needs. Most will be achieved when this workforce is diverse, yet coordinated. When this workforce is appropriately funded, resourced and supported, there is the potential to create enabling environments that support a positive transition to school for all involved. This involves

recognition of the value of staff through appropriate salaries and conditions, and opportunities for professional development and cross-sector collaboration.

One step in this process is to identify the nature of the workforce, recognising the diversity of professional staff and roles that support families and children across the transition to school. A further step is to promote collaboration among family support staff, social workers, counsellors, allied health professions and educators from the prior-to-school and school sectors, as well as any other professionals working with families and communities. Strategies to achieve this could include common professional development opportunities, integrated courses at tertiary level, and/or opportunities for cross disciplinary professional experience.

Workforce issues are linked to access and availability of support. Families and agency staff all identified a lack of qualified personnel as a factor that prevented ongoing access to support. As well as a shortage of allied health, social welfare and parenting professionals in all areas, but particularly in rural areas, it was noted that the often high and challenging case loads of those who did fulfil these roles led to staff burnout and high turnover. Where staff had been in place within communities for some time, they not only built relationships with families but also with professional networks. High staff turnover often precluded staff engagement in these networks and impeded the development of ongoing support for staff. In many, but not all, locations, there was a noticeable lack of participation in community networks by teachers, particularly those based in schools.

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