

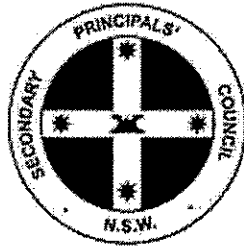
**Submission  
No 672**

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

**Organisation:** NSW Secondary Principals' Council

**Date received:** 8/03/2010

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## NSW SECONDARY PRINCIPALS' COUNCIL

### Submission to NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs

24<sup>th</sup> February 2010

Seven rural and six city secondary schools provided responses relating to the inquiry into the provision of services for students with special needs. Some of these responses were contributed to by more than one school and all involved consultation with staff.

The following represents a combined response and includes examples provided by these schools. There has been minimal editing however the names of schools have been deleted.

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

The overall viewpoint is that the level of funding in public schools is inadequate.

Examples given include:

- Access to aides in secondary schools is an issue as students sent from primary school, where they have had one-to-one with an aide, are not funded an aide in high school.
- Students who have been identified as 'at risk' have not been funded for one-to-one supervision with the allocation of an aide.
- A student with autism in the mainstream was allocated funding of approx \$900 per semester, which equates to approx 1 hour a week. Consequently there was no consistency for the student's day-to-day learning and the student ended up being a disruption in class.
- If money was allocated to schools and not to students then schools would be better able to support all students. Currently ADHD students do not get funding and behavioural support funding is also limited.
- An issue exists when parents reject funding; students still have needs.

- Some students receive limited funding which is disproportionate to the amount of effort needed by the school to obtain and maintain funding.
- Students diagnosed with a mild intellectual disability (IN1) have an identified learning disability but in the current model can only be supported through Learning Assistance Program Support (LAPS) funding and therefore receive minimal support. Most are expected to be integrated into the mainstream which requires extensive accommodations to be made. Who is responsible for this and how are time, professional learning and resourcing to be funded?
- The amount of funding has not increased with the growing number of disability enrolments in public schools. Schools are required to make current resources and programs stretch to encompass more and more students with more diverse needs than ever before with a community expectation that we are able to cater for each individual.
- Funding to students enrolled in a Support Unit seems to work well using economies of scale. All other students with disabilities suffer through inadequate resources to address deficits and needs. Schools spend many hours juggling who can have what and hoping for co-operative parents and good luck to administer resources. Last week, I had a School Learning Support Officer (SLSO) in a class attending to the needs of four students with disabilities when a volatile Year 7 boy acted out. When asked why he did not accompany the boy exiting the classroom, the SLSO said that he stayed with the greater need (three students) and hoped the Head Teacher would cope with the boy – he did not.
- Funding is grossly inadequate especially for students with an intellectual disability. These students experience many problems accessing the curriculum in a mainstream classroom of 25-30 students with one teacher and minimal SLSO support. Students with Autism also suffer terribly due to a lack of funding which, if provided, could make a difference to their educational outcomes. Funding is needed not only to support students in class but to provide teachers with release time to plan for successful curriculum adjustments and programs and access specialised teacher advice e.g. Support Teachers -either integration, learning Autism.
- Lack of funding makes inclusion of all students difficult in the school environment as we are restricted by the support we can give to students to allow them to participate fully.
- One respondent stated that 'generally funding for special education classes is adequate. There needs to be more flexibility to fund the intense support needs of high support students at the school level. Additional funding for access to VET classes, Job Coach and integration support (Special Ed transition to work) has dropped in real terms. VET support was initially provided with input from a profiling tool. This was abandoned which was unfortunate as it enabled fair identification of need.'

## 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 functional capacity rather than their disability

How money is allocated is definitely an issue causing concern and frustration as indicated by the following responses. Some felt that funding should be allocated according to a student's functioning capacity. Others felt that there should be a combined approach as indicated in the following statement. 'Both methods of funding are relevant and significant in best meeting individual student needs. Not all students are easily diagnosed; some have multiple issues but not a clear diagnosis. We need to be able to fund students who are not functioning within the mainstream but who cannot gain a clear diagnosis. More validity needs to be given to school professional judgement and assessment of the students with whom they work.'

### Other comments:

- Best practice would indicate a base rate of funding for the diagnosed disability coupled with a functionality factor for the individual.
- Both functional capacity and the actual disability need to be taken into consideration as specific disabilities have unique qualities that must be understood fully in order to plan and implement appropriate learning

plans. Knowing the specific disability empowers the teacher to know the requirements of that student. The capacity for functioning within the classroom also needs to be assessed to get a total picture of the student and their needs.

- Funds need to be directed into schools now. Students need more transition pathways and access to alternative models e.g. centres like Berne and Rosemount run great programs. Schools need more help for these students. If we do not help these students now, they will leave education with no pathways and may face a bleak future.
- The process of allocating funding must support individualised assessment of students to provide equitable support.
- Funding allocation should focus on the child's functioning in the classroom. Can they cope and stay on task?
- Organisational skills need to be constantly addressed. Students need help in work placements, work choices etc.
- Funding should be allocated on a needs basis not on labels e.g. an enrolment of a student with autism may result in an allocation to the school of "X" dollars. However all students with autism have differing characteristics and needs. Hence the level of support needs to be assessed on an individual basis as well as the disability.
- In our region we have four SSP behavioural schools and one suspension centre. They enrol small class sizes. If you were to group them, total enrolments would be close to 60 students. Yet there are 196 students with behaviours waiting to attend these settings. The reality is that many of these students will not receive a placement and mainstream schools will have to cope with their behaviours with little resourcing or support.
- Many students who have behavioural issues need a specialist environment, or smaller class sizes so that teachers are effectively able to address their issues and support them.
- One respondent stated: 'The procedures and practices we have developed have been designed based on the needs of our school community. This includes developing a full profile on the student to best identify the individual needs of the students to work with parents and health care professionals.'
- Funding needs to be based on the students' specific needs rather than on a formula based on the school population.
- In low SES schools in particular there is a likelihood of a higher percentage of students presenting with specific needs which impact on their learning in the classroom – particularly mental health.
- Another issue is a lack of ongoing support for students who show improvement in a program such as reading recovery. Students engage in a program, they finish it and then return to the normal stream with little support, ongoing monitoring or evaluation.
- There is a need for more specialist trained staff in schools to work with mainstream teachers in integration programs.
- Funding should not be allocated on a single functioning score.
- It is very important that the allocation of funding is aligned with functioning capacity.
- Profiling on individual need i.e. student's functioning is essential rather than just simply leaving it as a categorisation process.
- Strongly support the use of a sensitive profiling instrument and the team focus between the welfare and disability consultants, parents, teachers and students. This has been an issue since the McCrae report. Although there can be a time delay in this process, it is student focussed and needs to be maintained.
- Lack of support at a sub-regional level i.e. abolishing special education consultancy positions in favour of a more generic welfare model does not provide the expert assessment and review mechanisms that maintain the focus on the particular child.

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

**The level of special education places in the education system is totally inadequate. The following comments emphasise this fact.**

- NSWDET has worked to eliminate IN1 (previously IM) classes for a long period closing down units in specific areas. Rather than the neediest students getting extra help in a significantly smaller class they are placed in mainstream classes. Inclusion only works when it is from a fully committed, fully funded, fully resourced framework.
- Funding is limited and scarce. The number of students needing help is growing but the support is not. Mainstream schools are not resourced sufficiently to cater for these students. If a mainstream school identifies a student who is not able to integrate into the mainstream setting then an alternative environment for that student is needed. When this isn't available some of these students present a high safety risk and are moved into distance education or expelled. Expulsion is not a solution. Distance education can work for some students and their families but not all.
- Many parents cannot access special settings as these settings are too distant from the home school and result in transport issues and associated costs.
- The level of funding is inadequate. The number of special education settings is inadequate. There is extremely limited access to settings beyond Year 9; e.g. the majority of behaviour settings in West Sydney Region are only Years 5-8. There are a limited number of places for students in support classes to access SSP e.g. some applications for students requiring placement have been submitted to Placement Panel in excess of 7 times.
- Totally inadequate number of places in SSP or mainstream schools. The trend is to "mainstream" students but the staffing for this is absolutely inadequate. It is not "easier" to transition students into mainstream, but far more complex and time consuming than stand alone classes, units or schools.
- Places and programs for girls with conduct disorder and mental health issues are sadly neglected. Girls present differently and often less overtly than boys and are consequently overlooked or placed lower on the priority lists. Girls present with self harm, truancy/school refusal, inappropriate sexual behaviour, bullying and sometimes violence to others. These behaviours are often easier to manage than violent aggressive, loud, disruptive boys and therefore not seen as requiring immediate intervention. However this does not mean that these girls are being appropriately supported to improve their learning or their capacity to contribute to society. When a placement does become available the student is frequently the only girl. To place a disaffected adolescent daughter into such a setting with a program that is biased towards boys' issues is not likely to meet with success. Disability programs should be available to all students not just those with more aggressive behaviours.
- On the North Coast, there are very few services or alternate placements schools can access. The Coffs Harbour Learning Centre for 21 students is always full. Mental health issues are ignored unless suicide or threats are involved. Schools are expected to deal with all disorders supported en passant and with meagre funding support and resources. The truth is that we do not fully provide for the needs of our students. Suspension is our method of protecting the rest from the most acting out behaviours. Direct therapy and intervention do not happen – the itinerant behaviour model is not working in secondary schools.
- There is a huge deficiency with regards to the available places for students in support class settings. Many parents have had their child on waiting lists for special class placements and may have to wait several months or even years for a placement. Even then the placement may be a considerable distance from home in a school outside their area. If mainstream schools had better funding and services provided then parents would be happy to send their child to the local mainstream school, which would be better equipped to provide an inclusive approach for the student, the family and the local community of that student. Segregating students and sending them to special schools a long way away from their community has not been recommended in research. Families have few choices for the students with disabilities in schooling and adequate support.
- Students with autism may access a special class in primary and then when entering a secondary school such a class is no longer available. This can cause significant stress for students with special needs transitioning to high schools.
- Providing access to services that will make a difference to the students' overall learning is not addressed at all. There are not enough support classes for families wanting to access more specialised support for their child than can be provided in a mainstream class.

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

**Integrated support services for children with a disability in mainstream settings, such as school classrooms, is totally inadequate.**

- Integrated support in mainstream classes is grossly inadequate for students with intellectual disabilities and autism. Students with an intellectual disability have many problems accessing the curriculum in a mainstream classroom of 25-30 students with one teacher and minimal SLSO support. Students with Autism also suffer terribly due to lack of funding which if provided could make a difference to their educational outcomes and lives. Funding is needed not only to support students in class but support teachers in planning successful curriculum adjustments, programs and accessing specialised teacher advice e.g. Support Teachers integration, learning and/or Autism. Funding is needed to provide with release time to plan and consult for better educational outcomes.
- Funding to support students on the Autism/Aspergers spectrum is inadequate.
- Staffing within the mainstream is insufficient with inadequately training and support available for teachers and teachers' aides. The level of documentation and supervision for each student is high but the staffing is low, consequently case management is limited.
- Schools use SLSOs, withdrawal and suspension to deal with the needs of many students with special needs. Actually addressing learning deficits and disability services is extremely difficult. Travelling occupational and speech therapists give broad simplistic advice to staff, not therapy.
- There are no services provided for these students on a regular basis in mainstream classes. District office personnel have too many students to service and consequently may never get into classrooms due to the demands at the district level. The Support Teacher Learning Teacher Assistance (STLA) allowance in each school and the learning support officers are inadequate to meet the needs of students. Classroom teachers who are untrained in special education are left to do the best they can.
- Services that are specialised like speech, occupational and physiotherapy need to be at the school level and special education teachers need to be in all schools to help build the capacity of staff and support students needs.
- Support a more integrated, consistent and localised itinerant support service. Emphasis must be placed on employing staff with sound special education qualifications in schools and providing ongoing professional development.
- The numbers of students with mental health issues and autism are growing. Students with these issues require as specialised support as that rendered to students with vision and auditory needs.
- There is not enough funding in mainstream schools to support students with disabilities and teachers. One period per week to support a student with special needs is inadequate and can be disruptive. Schools are not able to offer on-going consistent support.
- It is difficult to find teachers aides and many are not trained.
- There is a need to look at regulations, currently teachers aides cannot supervise a student outside the classroom alone. Sometimes you need to exclude a student and have one-to-one supervision.
- There are not enough trained staff from behavioural units available to assist students in mainstream settings.
- A nurse was appointed to my school last year, what a wonderful service she provided. She linked families up quickly and identified support. But funding dried up and she had to leave.
- The submission/application and waiting for funds is inadequate with the lag in time from submission to support taking up to two years e.g. outreach support for students with autism. When support is provided it is often only offered for a short time.
- One respondent stated: 'Our community prefers single sex and an integrated program with specialist support but our staffing for IN1 will go possibly next year (no-one has told us yet), so where will these girls

go? We cater successfully for up to 60 girls in support programs 7 – 12 and have done for 10 years. We have been told that our program is an “exemplar” so we are rewarded with reduced funding and staffing.’

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

- In Support Units, excellent curriculum opportunities can be created. In mainstream, a quick adjustment and reactive measures predominate. Conduct Disordered students cannot function well in a mainstream setting because they need specialist diagnoses for functional behaviours, individual behaviour plans and intensive short term psychotherapy as a minimum.
- Life Skills courses are the only BOS courses available for students in NSW for students with intellectual disabilities to do if they want an external school credential and most parents at least insist on that. Life Skills courses are inadequate for students who cannot cope with the inflexibility and irrelevance of the mainstream courses and who are higher functioning intellectually. This will be even more apparent with the raising of the school age. There are insufficient alternate placements for students with conduct disorder who need much more practical hands on curriculum and teaching approach. Life skills courses are extremely teacher and resource greedy, most schools do not have adequate staffing to deliver these programs to best meet student need.
- Currently curriculum in mainstream schools does not meet the needs of students with mental health and behavioural issues. Life Skills does not seriously cater for these students in mainstream classes especially at HSC level. There is an urgent need to revise and deliver more relevant curriculum.
- The Life Skills outcomes are basic and do not reflect the skills and abilities of many students who have special needs. A curriculum gap exists between the syllabuses catering for students with Life Skills and traditional HSC syllabuses. Schools are attempting to develop alternative curriculum offerings. Additional resources and professional learning is needed to support this.
- Teachers need more time to be in-serviced and to adjust the curriculum in order to meet the specific needs of students who are intellectually disabled and/or conduct disordered.
- In a mainstream school really what is there? Teachers have no training, differentiating the curriculum is not the answer. In most cases students need work placements and training. They need ongoing support to access TAFE courses.
- Sometimes brain injury students are placed in class with students who are intellectually disabled and the curriculum does not meet their needs.
- Limited knowledge and understanding of teachers in the mainstream in offering Life Skills curriculum is an issue.
- Competency based checklists for students to be referenced against outcomes may be beneficial to both students and staff.
- Concern exists in relation to how the National Curriculum will impact on the delivery of Life Skills courses to students.
- The new 7 – 10 curriculum is excellent.
- HSC curriculum needs revision and expansion to align it with mainstream curriculum. Expansion of arts courses would be a good place to start.
- Access to quality distance education materials is needed for some students with conduct disorders in special risk centres and classes. The use of technology to deliver curriculum needs further investigation and support.
- Work Education and Work Studies need to be used more widely and a better utilization of VET courses in Stage Five is desirable.
- The National Curriculum debate should carefully consider the needs of all students.

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

The overwhelming view is that there is insufficient student and family access to professional support services for many reasons. One person has commented that they have found access to counsellors and community health to be at an acceptable level. But this is an isolated comment.

- There has been a huge growth in emotional disturbance across schools and the community. The current systemic support available for schools is not meeting this dilemma. Too often schools are expected to meet crises in terms of working with students with mental health issues with minimal support or are forced to 'rob Peter to pay Paul' i.e. use teachers' aide (special) time which belongs to particular students to help manage emergency situations.
- Counsellor provision in NSWDET schools is totally inadequate. Many schools of significant size do not have a full-time counsellor appointed. Many schools share a number of counsellors.
- School counsellor allocation is grossly inadequate especially now the school age has been raised and the move to integration has expanded. Every student who causes concern needs to be assessed which takes time, let alone the extra one-to-one counselling that needs to happen daily. All schools need a full time counsellor and not a shared person over 2 - 4 schools. This is ridiculous and negligent.
- School counsellor support is inadequate with the list for interviews and testing so long that students do not receive any service at all. North Coast has two paediatricians available and speech and occupational therapy are only rarely accessed.
- School counsellor support is minimal in schools compared to the need and outside agencies have huge waiting lists. This is not acceptable given the high level of demand for these services. There are no in-school speech, physio or occupational therapy services available in mainstream schools. Families have to pay costly private fees for these and long waiting lists are the normal situation.
- Counsellors in many cases are spending too much time on administrative matters and not working with students, families or staff. Other options need to be considered to manage the administration e.g. trainee counsellors, in last years of study, could be employed or volunteer to do paperwork.
- Lack of parental knowledge and funds to access services is a concern in low SES schools. Some parents are unable (or unwilling) to access the support of a paediatrician, clinical psychologist, speech pathologists or occupational therapists. This increases the need for extra school counsellor and learning support team intervention to support applications for funding support.
- Communication difficulties for many families present an issue. They do not know where to go to access services such as a speech therapist, occupational therapist or psychiatrist. When parents do find such services they may find the costs prevent them from accessing support for their students.
- Also there are long waiting lists with Community Health centres. By the time parents get assistance a child may have been suspended.
- The school takes on the role of coordinating, referring and advocating for these services as many parents are unable to access these without support.
- Families still seem to have difficulty accessing support in the speech therapy area. Free waiting lists are too long. No child should wait a year for speech therapy.
- Private providers are too expensive and public providers have waiting lists that are far too long. Providers are often located in areas which are difficult for parents to access. Many parents are from low SES, NESB and disability backgrounds and so these are additional barriers for them to negotiate. Consequently school personnel are required to provide additional, necessary and costly support to them in order to have students assessed.
- I have found good support in other areas – counsellors, community health etc.
- School counsellor support is not happening. There is a lack of integration between DET and the Health Department. Schools need to assist student access to speech therapists and physiotherapists.
- Access to professional support and services, particularly in the country, is far too limited in terms of availability and range of services and expertise.



- Ideally the DET should employ its own therapists. Many special education settings use community based funding to employ TOP UP therapists.
- There is insufficient support from Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care. Other issues include lack of staff continuity and expertise due to transient workers in some of these service roles.

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

- Staff training is currently low, non-existent or on the run. Professional learning in working with students with various disabilities and within integrated classrooms should be provided at the start of teacher training. There are insufficient experts available to assist schools or districts e.g. in the Sydney region only one person is trained to assist students with Autism. Hence it is very difficult for schools to access support. Only a limited number of special schools cater for these types of learners and they only have a limited number of placements.
- No university instructs pre-teachers in the reality of teaching in special education. Before beginning teaching many teachers have little or no concept that a student may be wired differently, may see you as someone similar to his father who beats him, isn't getting fed at home or is out all hours because the street is better than home.
- Not adequate. Even special education teachers need to have time to update professional training e.g. new thoughts, ideas on areas such as Autism.
- There is a need for additional quality training for staff so they can make sound and trusted professional judgements in consultation with other practitioners (counsellors, psychologists, paediatricians, etc).
- Very little professional learning is offered to staff both at pre-service and teacher levels. Training offered to student liaison support teachers as part of trial in 2009 needs to be made available to all staff not just a few.
- Pre-service training is almost non-existent. The training that is provided is not explicit or deep. The on-line course for practising teachers has good content but requires time and support to complete successfully. This is sadly lacking.
- There is no training. We do one-off courses to address Autism and behaviour issues but there is absolutely no underpinning philosophical stance that DET takes other than just try to manage and hope for the best.
- All pre-service training should include a component on special education as all teachers will work with students with special needs in their career.
- Ongoing training needs funding. All teachers need support and professional learning in these areas however they cannot all become experts. Teachers must be supported by other services in class and in school.
- Insufficient training is provided once in school.
- The DET system is using distance education services as a safety net for a range of students with disabilities. The increased enrolment age to 17 years is may result in an increase such enrolments.
- Opportunities for support for special education teachers are far too limited in terms of access to suitable professional learning, especially for country teachers. Ongoing support structures for special education teachers are needed as their settings can be quite isolated.

## 8. Any other related matters

- Schools struggle with funding for students with disabilities placed in mainstream. They strive to offer the best support possible with the resources available. One school commented that their SLSO's provide support by working in their own time.
- The numbers of students with special needs is growing. But the support is not.

- Schools have new groups of students with disabilities coming through ESL and Mental Health areas. Initially it can be difficult to identify these students' disabilities because language covers up disability. In addition some cultures will not accept that their child has a disability.
- Howard Gardner in his Multiple Intelligences identified Emotional Intelligence as a new talent. In schools there are students with low Emotional Intelligence and who exhibit poor social skills. As a result these students often experience depression and /or bullying. Schools struggle to help them.
- Extra money is not always the answer. Perhaps really looking at how effectively the money is spent and starting backwards may be a first step. But change is necessary.
- Other points which need to be factored into the "formula" for funding include:
  - The number of suspensions (both short and long), the reasons for suspensions and the proportion of suspensions in relation to the school population
  - The number and type of serious incidents which occur in the school and how these relate to students with diagnosed Mental Health issues
  - The transient nature of the school population
  - The number of referrals made to DoCS (up to 2009), now Community Services and the Well Being Unit.
- In 2004 one school was asked (firmly) to move to an integrated IN1 (previously IM) model because their program already worked successfully in this way. They did so reluctantly with no guarantee that staffing would be retained but the school did receive an acknowledgement that to continue providing a quality service the same staffing would be necessary. Unfortunately all the people involved in that decision have moved on and nothing was in writing. The school is now uncertain about staffing for the future. "Our model works and we cater for the students who we would normally target for an IN1 class (18 students, we have never had less and still don't) plus 8-10 in each year which we identify as well as the low ability students – all way below national average on NAPLAN. Our model is flexible enough to cater for all of these students at least in English and Maths."
- Another school is classified as low SES and high NESB. The school does not qualify for either Priority Action Schools funding or the National Partnership low SES funding even though it has the same ICSEA as the surrounding schools that do attract additional funding. "We do a great job with these students, as our value added data would attest, and as a result, we will apparently lose the only support that enables us to have this level of success for our least empowered students and parents."
- Funding to students enrolled in a Support Unit seems to work well using economies of scale. All other students with disabilities suffer through inadequate resources to address needs. Schools spend many hours juggling who can have what and hoping for co-operative parents and good luck to administer resources.
- To truly be inclusive of the whole student population schools need teachers, support officers and special needs services staff who are properly trained. Integrated classes also need lower student to teacher ratios.
- State & Regional plans should consistently emphasise the importance of special education focuses, otherwise there is the very real danger that these students and support may become marginalised.
- One school on the North Coast has had a Support Unit in temporary accommodation for over 20 years. While the school is now on the major capital works list (region) for permanent accommodation, there are many people in the community, who will continue to believe that support students are marginalised until the work is completed.