

Submission  
No 209

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

**Organisation:** Early Education (EarlyEd) Inc

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**Early Education (EarlyEd) Inc submission to the  
*Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs***

Early Education (EarlyEd) Inc is a family-centred early childhood intervention service for young children (birth – school entry) with disabilities or delays in their development, and their families. We provide services to children in Northern Sydney and the Auburn, Baulkham Hills, Holroyd and Parramatta LGAs.

A key component of our service delivery is working with children and families to support them in the transition to school process. Our programmes offer information and support to and between families, a specific school readiness group for children in the year prior to school, support to child care / preschool and active involvement in the learning support team. Our family-centred philosophy underlies our commitment to collaborative planning that respects the family's right to make decisions regarding school placement for their child.

Our submission is based on the experiences of our staff and the families with whom we work. We believe that there are significant shortcomings in the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs, in terms of funding, support and working with families.

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

- There is no doubt that overall funding levels are inadequate.

*Children that don't qualify for funding*

- Children with severe communication delays often receive no funding or support.
- Children with mild intellectual delays receive no funding or support.
- These children, who qualify for funding support in preschool (through SCAN) or childcare (through ISS), do not qualify for funding when they get to school even though their needs have not changed, and in fact they may need more support in a school environment.

*Children that qualify for funding*

- Funding levels to those children who qualify are low and often insufficient for a full year. Often funds are all spent in first term
- Of great concern is that an increasing number of schools in Northern Sydney are asking families to cover the shortfall in funding if they want their child to attend their local mainstream school. A



family, whose child transitioned from our service to his local public school, had to pay approx \$8,000 in the child's first year at school, for aide time. In other instances, the P&C have been told they need to raise money to pay for additional time for a learning support teacher and teacher's aide.

- Where the school does not receive as much funding level as they require, children are not allowed to attend for full days or a full week.

#### *The funding process*

- Parents are often not given information on the basis for how funding is allocated to their child or how it is used
- The funding process is a very unpleasant experience for families. Families have reported to us that DET personnel discuss their child as if the parents were not present. The need to place great emphasis on their child's disability and what they can't do in order to try and access adequate funding places great stress on families.

#### **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 function capacity rather than their disability**

- A student's function capacity should determine level of funding – the children with severe communication delays and the children with a mild intellectual are a case in point. Although they require ongoing assistance with learning and modifications to the curriculum, because their 'disability' does not qualify for funding, they are left without support in mainstream settings. In addition, as they do not meet the criteria for a support class they do not have a supported learning environment.

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

- Varies with area. In Northern Sydney there are inadequate places, particularly in support classes.
- Inequity in determining provision of support classes – it seems that additional support classes for children with autism are started as soon as a school has the required number of students. Students with other diagnoses / needs are not offered the same access to a support class.



- Anecdotal evidence (from our staff / families) would indicate that the individual school principals' need for 'bums on seats' dictates the placement of a child in a support class vs. mainstream setting.
  - A family has reported that they have had to pay private therapists to put a case for their child to get placement in a support class.
  - Families are not given a choice of location of support class / SSP
  - Families are not informed of their child's placement in a support class until the last weeks of term
4. This is very unsettling for families who are already suffering from a great deal of stress / grief around the transition to school of their child. In addition, research strongly indicates the importance of a smooth and planned transition to school for all children. The late notification of placement renders this impossible, as there is no time for the children to undertake an orientation programme.
4. **The adequacy of integrated support services for children with a disability in mainstream settings, such as school classrooms**
- DET personnel are often poorly informed about resources available within their own system e.g. Principals and school counsellors are unaware of access request procedures, funding options such as emergency funding. Staff from our early childhood intervention service report they have been in the position where they have had to tell DET staff about these things.
  - Poor transfer of information between early childhood intervention service and the classroom teacher. Reports written to assist the classroom teacher are often not passed on from the school counsellor to the teacher.
  - Families report that they feel frustrated in trying to get information about their child and the lack of a central person supporting their child.
6. **Student and family access to professional support and services, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and school counsellors**
- We are aware that this is inadequate particularly if families cannot afford to pay for private therapy. Early childhood intervention services cease when a child enters school, therapy is available through ADHC or Dept of Health depending on the child's level of disability. Both have long waiting lists.



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

- Teacher training is inadequate - we have children with a moderate intellectual disability whose parents wanted them to be part of their local community and enrolled them in their local school. Although they received some funding, the placement failed as the classroom teacher and aide did not have sufficient training and support to meet the child's needs.

8. **Other** – We also have concerns about:

- The difficulty of developing collaborative relationships between DET personnel and families.
- The procedure of having to go to your local school to enrol, even when your child's needs are best met in an SSP is very confronting for families. Families are often dealing with grief issues around transition to school and this reinforces that their child will not go to "normal" school. Furthermore, for families where English is their second language this process is even more confusing. We have many reports of families who were treated particularly rudely by the principal and / or office staff when they approached their local school.

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