

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

Organisation: Federation of Parents and Citizens' Association of NSW

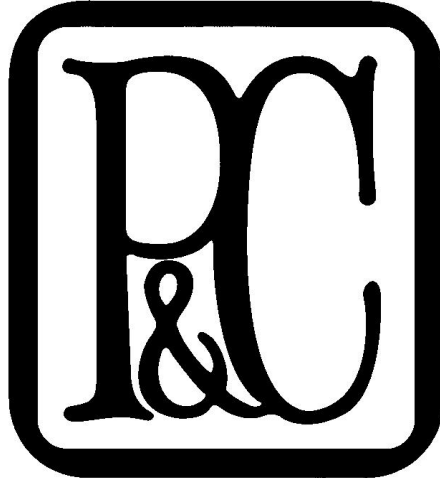
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**Submission to the Inquiry into transition support for students with additional or complex needs and
their families**

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Preamble¹

The Federation of Parents and Citizens' Association of New South Wales (P&C Federation) is committed to a free public education system which is open to all people, irrespective of culture, gender, academic ability and socio-economic class and empowers students to control their own lives and be contributing members of society.

This commitment is based on the belief that:

- * All students have the capacity to learn;
- * The Government has prime responsibility to provide an education system open to all, which is free and secular;
- * Schools should be structured to meet the needs of individual students and should respect the knowledge those students bring to school and build on that knowledge to foster their understanding about the world.

Parents as partners in the education process, have a right and a responsibility to play an active role in the education of their children.

P&C Federation and its representatives share a responsibility of ensuring representative decision making for the benefit of all students.

Introduction

The Federation of Parents and Citizens' Association of New South Wales (P&C Federation) welcomes the opportunity to submit our contributions for the Inquiry into transition support for students with additional or complex needs and their families. The P&C Federation supports the position of individual student educational and developmental needs being met by a range of differential services expressed through appropriate and well planned curricula, a range of learning programs and a school environment conducive to engaging all students. These should be conducted by sensitive and well trained personnel in conjunction with parents and family involvement and support.

In NSW there has been a significant increase in the incidence of adolescent mental health issues, in the diagnosis of children on the autism spectrum and other student disability diagnoses as well as the parental choice for the inclusion of students with confirmed disabilities into mainstream classes. These factors impact on the required additional support needed for staff, students and families with the school communities across NSW. A primary component of ensuring that each and every child has the best possible opportunity to excel is how well they are supported and the transition processes undertaken during often disruptive transition points. Additionally and of equal importance is the support that is provided to the student, parent, family, school staff and wider community.

¹ Preamble of Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of NSW. *2010 P&C Handbook* (6)

Transition of students involves a range of timing and settings:

- * Early intervention to formal schooling through entering kindergarten
- * Primary school to High school
- * High school to post school options
- * Mainstream setting to support class placement
- * Support class to mainstream class
- * School to alternate setting due to behaviour issues or medical problems
- * Alternate setting to mainstream setting following absence for reasons such as behaviour or medical issues²

The adequacy and accessibility of appropriate support for children and their families

There are a number of issues around the adequacy and accessibility of appropriate support for children with additional and complex support needs. While the education department provides funding, resources (human and material) and information, the nature of each of these resources is often reliant upon other factors including geographic location of the child and family, stability and availability of resourcing and family or school knowledge of the services available.

Accessibility to support for children and families is often dependent upon the location of the family. For students in rural and remote areas, the access to services is dependent upon the availability of personnel and resources within their community.

Similar problems can also be experienced in metropolitan and larger regional areas, where overstretching of resources due to increasing demand can lead to waiting lists.

Some areas are more vulnerable than others in terms of support staff turnover and retention. This is particularly true in rural and regional areas where it is more difficult to attract and retain staff. There is anecdotal information which suggests that families sometimes have to make decisions about uprooting their children to seek better access to services. The result is that in seeking medical and other assistance, the family support network is diminished and sometimes removed altogether. It is this type of difficult decision which needs to be made in order to provide an optimum support option for students with additional support needs.

In cases where there are support staff available, students sometimes have to compete with one another for access to this resource. Staff have specified caseloads which are not always flexible enough to encompass additional students as their needs are identified. Waiting lists are developed unless a mechanism is presented by which the need for expansion of a service is identified. Any expansion opportunity is dependent upon justification of an ongoing and extended need for additional resources. In some cases the opportunity exists to retrain staff to perform a specific role, but this is highly

² See Appendix 1 and 1a

dependent on time, availability, and willingness of staff to undertake additional professional learning in order to fill a vacancy

Each case of additional or complex needs has specialist resources and training methods that must be undertaken in able to offer the most accurate and tailored assistance to students. For example; in the case where a service is provided to students with a sensory disability including vision and hearing impairments, the type of professional learning required by staff may be more complex and time consuming.

In some situations, the availability of suitable services may involve travel for students; particularly in rural areas this travel may be extensive in order to access appropriate services. Families are willing to undertake this commitment if they feel it will benefit their child in improving their educational outcome.

Where support services are available, it is important to determine that the service is one that will support and benefit each individual students needs. It is important that support staff are aware that not every child with the same diagnosis has the same support needs. For example, a student with a diagnosis on the Autism spectrum can display needs which are extremely different than another student with a similar diagnosis. It is vital that a functional assessment is completed with each student and their family at the time of transition and this assessment is used to identify the individual support needs of the student.

Sometimes difficulty in providing a suitable service lies within problems in identifying complex needs that a student may have. Although it may only require one diagnosis for a student to be given access to a support service, this can often lead to issues where the student requires a range of complimentary services and not solely one service. Students with autism and vision problems complicated by mental health issues may not always be provided with the multi disciplinary services they need to cater for all of their needs. Conversely, students with complex needs may not have one specific disability which allows them access to a service. These students may be provided with support but under a 'special consideration' provisions, this can leave students susceptible to being removal from a service if another student with a clearly identified disability enters the school system. These students are especially vulnerable at times of transition.³

Knowledge is power and unless families have knowledge of the services available, they are not able to access services for their child. The problems exist where, despite knowing what is available, families do not know how to ask for or access support. Families may require additional personnel support during meetings and other interactions. Those who do not have access to this additional support mechanism may find their child falling through the cracks in an education service that has a specific role of supporting all children.

It currently appears that services are available but the adequacy and accessibility is dependent upon a family's knowledge of the services, the staff available to provide the service, the continued funding of

³ See Appendix 3

the service and the process by which a child or student at transition is offered a placement within the service.

Best Practice approaches to ensure seamless and streamlined assistance during transition

Information – written and spoken

There are a number of publications which were developed by the Education Department many years ago around 'Who will educate my child'. There are booklets available on transition as well as recent videos and although they offer assistance throughout the transition process there appears little reference to those children with additional or complex needs.

An optimal outcome for families would include, in addition to publications, the availability of access to some form of case management process. This case management would allow for one person to take carriage of ensuring that the family receives the information, has the opportunity to discuss it, and ensures they understand what is contained in the documents and can 'tell their story' and ask questions to clarify their position.⁴

It is important that parents and families are involved in all aspects of planning for students. This includes educational personnel consulting the child's primary carer and utilising the information they provide to offer the best support for the student. This is especially important at significant transition points in their education. The use of a single person or case worker involved in the transitional planning along with the family engages the family and ensures the process is undertaken with consistency.

Positive communication can be established when a meeting is organized by a school between the staff and parent prior to transitions. This is usually best when undertaken in the year preceding the transition (usually Term 4) so that there can be open discussion around the needs of the students.

Transport

Transport for some students and families can be an issue especially during transition where access to services is being applied for. Families may be required to either apply for access to special transport or change current arrangements. The movement from one setting to another may introduce increased needs to access a transport method where previously there was no need. It is essential that families are provided with information on the criteria to access transport and the options available. It is also important, at times, for the family to be supported in completing the necessary paperwork required to access the transport service as some documents are complex or require supporting documentation.

Teacher

Transition impacts on staff as well as students. Staff need to understand and cater for the requirements of students within their classrooms as well as in the playground. They need to be provided with

⁴ See Appendix 2

professional learning opportunities that allow them to understand the variety of additional and complex needs that students may bring to the learning environment.

Current staff need contact with and the ability to develop a relationship with previous learning areas, be it early childhood, Primary setting or, in the case of transition in areas where there are senior years settings from the preceding junior campus.

Support staff

When working with a child with additional and complex needs, there are a number of personnel who must be considered, this may require collaboration between health and education staff as a multidisciplinary team. Students often access services such as; Speech Pathologists, Occupational Therapists, Physiotherapists, specialist support staff at schools, school counsellor teams, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Teams and, in the case of medical needs, medical personnel, independently. Each individual service possesses information related to the child and their needs and there should be ongoing relationships and liaison with these individuals. Each service should be seen as integral to all transition processes and not seen as an add on service.

In some situations, the movement from one setting to another may result in a change in support staff. This is especially prevalent when the movement is from Primary school to High school. Some support staff prefer to remain in the Primary School and not move with the student to the new setting resulting in the student and family losing a long term and valuable relationship. For some students and families, where support personnel have been a significant part of their life for several years, this proves quite distressing. Not only do the students and families have to face the prospect of not having the support personnel, but they are also required to meet and develop a relationship with a new person who may be part of a child's life for the next six years.

Physical environment

There are often times when the need arises to alter the physical environment in which a child is to spend the next few years. This may include but is not limited to, building ramps for accessibility, providing access to upper story rooms, identifying tripping hazards, building fencing or securing areas to ensure the safety of students.

It is vital that the needs of students are determined with ample time before the transition point to ensure that appropriate physical environment changes in the school environment are completed.

It is similarly important to ensure that alterations to the classroom including provision of desks, chairs etc have been completed well before the student moves into the new environment.

Social issues

Families continue to worry about the social relationships their children make and maintain during their school life. Transition periods are some of the more difficult times as peer groups change with the movement from one setting to the next. Early childhood settings are often the first place that a child

experiences interaction with children from differing family structures and cultural backgrounds. This is also the environment where children first experience 'making' friends.

It is important for families that children are offered the opportunity to participate in all social experiences available in the classroom and the playground. When identifying the needs for supporting students in the playground, it is important that the decisions made do not have a negative impact on the child. Staff offering support in the playground should be mindful not to make the child stand out or cause children to be ignored or ridiculed by peers. An example may be that a school identifies students with a history of absconding in their last learning environment, making them wear fluorescent vests which are easily visible in the playground. This in turn brands them and implies difference to their peers.

Funding support

Transition points are usually the time when an update of student needs is determined and additional paperwork needs to be completed. Families become nervous at this time, as they recognise the need to ensure their child continues to have access to the support they are currently accessing. There is fear that with the change in school setting, a removal or reduction of the current funding allocation may be incurred. In some situations, an increase in funding is needed as the transition places additional pressure on the student for which ongoing and increased support may be required.

Where a student's additional needs increase due to the nature of their disability, it is important to discuss with the family the implications of their transition needs.

Assessment

Students with additional needs who apply for support funding or access to specialist support units will be required to undergo assessment at transition from early childhood setting to school or from Year 6 to Year 7. There is, however, rarely any assessment done in the movement from High School to post school settings, causing difficulties when service providers frequently request the most up to date assessment on the individual. In many cases these assessments are over two years old and as such then require updating. This can cause difficulties for families as they source and access personnel to carry out required assessments.

Other related matters

The attitude of school staff is vital in providing an environment which will promote a smooth transition for students and their families. Families need to feel that staff are welcoming the student and providing a 'fresh start' as they move from one learning environment to the next. A new environment provides a new set of eyes to look at the child needs and provide the necessary support to ensure these needs are met. Staff in schools need further support to make sure that they can see the potential in all students and that they have support to ensure that they help them reach it.

It is important to recognize the types of needs which are classed as additional and complex. There are some examples of situations to consider in the Appendices.

Conclusion

The P&C Federation believes that the role of Support services during transition periods is a vital role within schools and school communities. The need for a review of the roles, range and nature of services and support that is offered is of vital importance for the wellbeing of students and children.

The main points that the P&C Federation are most concerned around include but are not limited to:

- * Overstretching of resources and under budgeting for increasing student needs.
- * Staff turnover and retention, training and caseloads.
- * A significant increase in the incidence of adolescent mental health issues, in diagnosis of students on the autism spectrum and other student disability diagnoses as well as the parental choice for the inclusion of students with confirmed disabilities into mainstream classes.
- * Growing pressures on youth are compounding to not only impact children but also their support networks.
- * Succinct channels of function needing to be incorporated within the system to ensure that the delivery of support and services is being targeted where it is needed most.

The P&C Federation feels strongly about support services which will assist in the engagement of the students in Public Schooling and in their learning experiences.

P&C Federation acknowledges the review and hopes that the NSW Legislative Council's standing committee on Social Issues takes into account many of the key areas that concern parents, students and school communities. We hope the comments made in this document are of assistance with discussions around this subject.

P&C Federation would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to comment on the review. We look forward to seeing the results and welcome any further discussion this may evoke.

Appendix

Appendix 1

A High School student who was diagnosed with leukemia, requiring a bone marrow transplant.

During treatment there was a problem which resulted in organ damage. The disease and treatment resulted in extensive learning time lost and student falling behind significantly. The transition from the hospital environment back to the school environment was impacted upon due to the lost time. The impact was on academic, social and psychological grounds for the student and his family.

Appendix 1a

A Primary School student who has had behavioural issues since entering the school system and has spent an extensive amount of time accessing a Tutorial Centre.

This has included an extension of the time at the Centre on special consideration in an attempt to address the wide range of issues, including mental health problems. The subsequent transition to High School involved two changes of setting (Primary School to High School and Tutorial Centre to mainstream learning environment).

Appendix 2

If a parent indicates that their child has 'meltdowns' at home due to specific reasons and this can affect the families ability to get the child to school on time, the school needs to take this situation into account when determining the individual support they will offer in relation to attendance requirements for the school. Providing the family with a letter every time they have to cope with the child in meltdown mode does not assist with smooth transition.

Appendix 3

A student who had a stroke at birth which left her with very mild cerebral palsy.

This student, who lived in an isolated community was able to be provided with support in a school setting. Although her psychometric assessments indicated a student with low average cognitive functioning, she experienced language problems, social difficulties and learning difficulties for which she was able to access the Royal Far West program at Manly (due to the geographic isolation). As she transitioned to mainstream High School, her family were concerned about her ability to cope with the movement from small school to significantly larger school (6 students to 670 students) as well as the necessary support required from teaching staff who had no knowledge of her complex needs. This student had no ability, due to lack of documentation, to access support class services.