

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

**Organisation:** Country Women's Association of NSW

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**COUNTRY WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF NEW SOUTH WALES**



**SUBMISSION:  
Inquiry into Transition Support for Students  
with Additional or Complex Needs and their  
Families**

**To:** The Director  
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**From:** Social Issues Committee  
Country Women's Association of NSW

**11 August, 2011**

The Social Issues Committee of the Country Women's Association of NSW wishes to thank the NSW Legislative Council's Standing Committee on Social Issues for the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into Transition Support for Students with Additional or Complex Needs and their Families. This is a very important matter, one which again shows the vast differences/gap between city and country children with needs and their families.

The funding of children with disabilities is a complex mess of state and federal grants and allocations, made worse by different definitions and categories of disability.

It is thought that this aspect of education should start with the teaching curriculum at university. Planning for individual students' specific needs is a complex skill and student teachers must be taught accordingly. Each child has individual needs and the student teacher must be shown how to proceed from the specialists' diagnoses.

Some city and regional schools have access to a large pool of qualified persons and agencies to assist; whereas small one or two teacher country schools (sometimes with just a teacher's aide to help out) will have no support. Governments need to look at how this aspect will be overcome to ensure that country children and their families are not disadvantaged.

Members of this committee are aware of a country state primary school (with an enrolment of 130) which includes eight special needs children of varying ages. The allocation of aides' times for these children varies from 4¾ to 6½ hours per week. Most of the eight are autistic (not diagnosed before starting kindergarten and first classes) and cause considerable chaos in class, resulting in teacher stress and burnout. It is not unusual for principals to have to resort to using the priority low socio economic status school funding to employ an extra teacher/aide to cope with the special needs children – money which they would have liked to have spent on other important school projects, but the staff must be looked after.

Country school children with disabilities, their parents, teachers and co-students suffer yet another disadvantage/discrimination because of their distance from major centres because each child, in addition to his 4¾ to 6 hours per week with an aide, is visited for 30 minutes once a month or every 2nd month by itinerant teachers who work with the blind, deaf and behaviourally challenged children. This is just not good enough. Teachers have to consider the other children in the class.

Vision Australia and Guide Dogs Australia work very hard to assist students with impaired sight, by providing special computers, large print reading matter, clearly marked utensils etc.

The NSW Department of Education has stated that there has been an increase of 88 per cent in children diagnosed with autism in NSW public schools between 2005 and 2009. Many private schools refuse to enroll children with autism because of lack of funding available. This avalanche of children with special needs is being felt most acutely in mainstream classes, where there is too little funding to provide individual support.

There have been many media reports of doctors deliberately diagnosing children as autistic so they can get help for other problems. Autism now attracts more funding, especially in the early intervention years. In 2008 the Helping Children with Autism Package began, requiring the child to be diagnosed as autistic before turning six. Following diagnosis the child then qualifies for \$12,000 in funding (\$6,000 for 2 years) until aged seven when that funding was withdrawn. In those two funded years the parents have to cram in as many as possible visits to specialists including speech pathologists, occupational therapists and psychologists etc. Country parents find it very difficult (nearly impossible) to obtain the required number of appointments with specialists. To have to travel to major centres for appointments is exhausting and expensive to fund two nights' accommodation, and the loss of days of work for the wage earner. After the package runs out, the child will have access to specialist services through Medicare until turning thirteen. Again, in country areas there is a definite lack of specialist services. Parents have stated that, while they are most appreciative of their carers' allowance, this covers one occupational therapist and one speech therapist per month or just one psychologist appointment per month.

However, parents view this package like a secret society. Very little information is available – many do not learn about it until it is too late. Those who do qualify, lack guidance as to how to spend the funds, as there is a lot to come to terms with after getting the diagnosis before dealing with the services and finances.

The Federal Government's pre-budget statement spoke of \$200 million extra spending on school facilities for disabled children. New services such as speech and occupational therapy delivered at schools by health and student welfare professionals (hopefully more for country

schools), additional hours of in-class support, and access to up to \$12,000 for intensive early intervention therapies for eligible children under six years with sight or hearing impairment, Down Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy or Fragile X syndrome. These services will (when delivered) make a huge difference to the lives of pupils, parents and staff.

Sadly, Australia has become a "have and have not" society. Parents who, because of work/career/money demands, put their children into care (crèches etc.) often from six months old, know that the child will (in child minding and preschool situations) undergo tests for medical, physical, mental capabilities and action taken to correct any faults before reaching infants school. BUT, so many parents cannot afford pre-school fees and often their children arrive at kindergarten/infants school with speech delay, low literacy/numeracy, lacking social and anger management skills, and are then diagnosed much too late to be autistic/ attention deficit etc. It is these children (especially in the country areas) who put such a strain on teachers. Their lack of social skills, lack of response to authority, lack of anger management puts such stress on teachers who, in many cases, also have diagnosed children with the pitiable quota of aides allocated in their classes. The well adjusted children in the class suffer extremely because teachers have to control the small number of "special" children, before they can teach the other students.

To ensure that all children receive the very best start in education, this committee feels that NSW state schools should offer twelve months free pre-schooling, where developmental problems would be detected. Public schools in other states offer this service, why not NSW? This would eliminate parents saying "I can't afford for my child to go to pre-school," and, even if every child 3 to 4 years old in that area went only two half days a week, it would enable that child to receive all testing necessary to ensure that child was ready for school (physically, emotionally, social skills etc.) and, if thought necessary and helpful, parent/teacher meetings could be set up. Parents have to be encouraged, have to accept their responsibilities and commit to obtaining all extra services for the child. This committee knows of neglectful/thoughtless parents being referred to DoCS. If that child was prescribed funding for diagnosed complaints then that child should be able to keep that funding if schools are changed.

Public schools promote Transition and Buddy Programs for incoming Kindergarten students and Year 6 students entering high school, but there will be no easy/seamless transition unless every incoming child

has had a full assessment done. Without this early intervention for all children, we will continue to see students in state schools at all levels struggling in special and main stream classes with low literacy, numeracy, social skills etc. These children have to be diagnosed and treatment started early otherwise there is no easy transition as they are pushed up from class to class because of age – often with no extra funding supplied to the schools.

Finally, this committee firmly believes that:-

(a) The Federal Government should introduce a national standard to cover transition support for students with complex needs. Funding/treatment/curriculum should be the same in every state, and transferable interstate.

(b) There should be much more support given for funding/specialist teachers/aides/smaller classes to all "special" and main stream classes, especially in outer region/rural/ remote areas.

(c) NSW should adopt (in line with other states) the policy of a free of cost pre-school year, so every child entering kindergarten has been fully assessed, treatment arranged and support services set up.

Social Issues Committee

Country Women's Association of NSW.