

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

Organisation: Autism & Asperger's Support Group, Central West
Name: Mr John Betts
Position: President
Date received: 19/02/2010

Autism & Asperger's Support Group – Central West Inc.
P.O. Box 1904
Orange NSW 2800

16 February 2010

Ms Robyn Parker
Committee Chair
Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2

“The provision of education to students with a disability or special needs”

I wish to make a submission to the above inquiry on behalf of the parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the Orange district.

ASD is an exceptional disorder for the following reasons:

- There are a large number of children born with ASD. The latest figures are 1 in 160 births.
- The symptoms are not obvious and children may go undiagnosed.
- Diagnosis can only be done by looking for the presence of a particular pattern of behaviours.
- There is no cure; it is a life long developmental disorder.
- There are a large range of severity of impairments in communication, social relating and behaviours; not every characteristic is evident in every person.
- These impairments and sensory sensitivities will cause unmanageable behaviour in children with ASD and this behaviour is mostly misunderstood and poorly managed by school personnel.
- People with ASD will suffer overwhelming anxiety, frustration and confusion because of their different understanding of the world and the demands of everyday life.
- People with higher functioning ASD have and will continue to contribute enormously to society if managed well in school.

Most of the parents in the Central West of NSW who have contacted the Support Group report that the education system is very frustrating and the range of experiences their children have received have varied from being ignored to being terrorised by untrained and insensitive teachers.

The lack of knowledge of ASD by teachers can be overcome if ASD is a special and separate component of teacher undergraduate training. Also every existing qualified teacher should undertake special training in ASD and observe the techniques used by their peers who are successful in teaching children with ASD. The successful methods used to teach ASD children are equally useful and helpful for lots of other children. Some teachers have already undertaken in-service training in ASD, however when they return to their classroom they fail to implement the training. This rarely happens in schools where the pressure for teachers to change their teaching styles comes from the Principal and the executive and the school has adequate funding and resources to support the ASD children.

There seems to be a push by the NSW Department of Education and Training for schools to re-train teachers and to implement teaching programs especially for ASD children but this push does not come with adequate resources and there is no incentive for schools to participate. The circumstances are far worse in regional areas like Orange and smaller towns. There is a vast range of situations and a total lack of choices. Often NSW DET is left to provide all the resources because DADHC and NSW Health have no one to help the children with ASD or the parents. This stretches the already very limited funds or trained staff. School counsellors have at least 10 times too many children to look after and they can be stretched to the point where they are ineffective.

Special schools seems to be adequate for ASD children who do not have any particular issues or behaviour problems but if the child presents any issues out of the ordinary the staff do not have the correct training or the school additional resources to provide successful outcomes. A better solution for regional areas would be to have special autism classes in main stream schools for the lower functioning children. The higher functioning children (Asperger's) can cope in main stream schools within a special setting but they need to assess the main stream curriculum and undertake electives which are tailored to they special needs especially if they have major sensory issues. For example children who have tactile, auditory or olfactory problems would find textiles, metal work, wood work and cooking classes difficult.

In every case children with ASD need to have an individual education plan that is agreed to by parents, teachers and health professionals. It is essential that they work at their own pace and with material that they find relevant and logical. Teachers need treat every child as an individual and learn how to motivate them to learn. ASD children should not be rushed and they should be thoroughly prepared for any changes to the routines.

The best resource that teachers and schools have to assist them in the education of ASD children is the parents. The parents know the children better then anyone, they know what causes the meltdowns and they know what strategies work best. Many studies have shown that parents, carers and teachers of children with ASD suffer more mental illness then those of children with other disabilities. I am convinced that if teachers and carers work with parents the outcomes would be better and there would be less stress for everyone.

I hope the outcomes of this inquiry lead to improved approaches to the education of children with disabilities or special needs, especially those with ASD.

Yours truly

John Betts
President
Autism & Asperger's Support Group, Central West