

Submission
No 230

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

Name: Ms Corinna Lueg

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18 February 2010

Robyn Parker
Committee Chair
General Purpose Standing Committee No 2
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Ms Parker

Inquiry: The Provision of Education to Students with a Disability or Special Needs

Thank you for providing a mechanism for the public to make submissions on this very important, and largely neglected element of education. It appears to be timely, given the recent launch of the My School website in highlighting schools' educational performance.

I make my submission to this inquiry as a parent of a 10 year old boy who has been diagnosed with severe dyslexia. My comments will be specific to my experiences and knowledge of this particularly disability and its treatment in the school system, however, there are many other similar specific disabilities that would have the same issues, and have the same level of serious neglect.

I agree totally with your comments in announcing the inquiry:

"Interacting with the education system can be a frustrating and confusing experience for parents of a child with a disability or special needs, as they attempt to ensure that their child gets adequate support to reach their full potential"AGREED!

"An area of concern for teachers and parents alike is the adequacy of funding for children with a disability of special needs attending NSW schools."AGREED!

Is Dyslexia a Disability?

For an excellent and succinct background to the state of Dyslexia in Australia, the recent report on 10 January 2010 from the Dyslexia Working Party "*Helping People with Dyslexia – A National Action Agenda*", to the Hon Bill Shorten, Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities and Children's Services provides a background (see Appendix A)
<http://www.dyslexiaaustralia.com.au/DYSWP.pdf>

How Dyslexia is Funded by the NSW School System

The NSW Department of Education should be able to provide the Inquiry with the mechanism for the funding for different disabilities, and to what extent it funds individual children, and to what extent it funds schools or districts on a global basis. I would be interested to also know (and the Inquiry should want to know), if DET can provide figures (obtained from the schools) on how many children in NSW have been diagnosed with Dyslexia and other neurological language disorders (ignoring for the moment the undiagnosed) and if and how much formal support they are receiving in the public education system.

From my experience as a parent, my understanding is that in NSW Dyslexia is considered a “language based disorder” with a “low support need”. As a “language based disorder” a child with dyslexia receives no direct funding for learning support. This is very surprising, given Dyslexia directly affects basic literacy and numeracy (ie the disorder is defined as the inability to achieve basic literacy and numeracy standards due to the disability).

Other disorders, such as autism and aspergers, which are primarily behaviour/social disorders that *may* also indirectly affect literacy and numeracy, do receive direct funding.

Some NSW children with dyslexia will receive some learning support through the school’s Support Teachers Learning Difficulties (STLD) allocation – but only with luck, and never what is really needed. A primary school is a wholly “literacy-based learning environment” – in this type of environment Dyslexia is a HIGH LEVEL SUPPORT NEED.

NSW provides a number of STLD which are allocated to schools based on the overall school results of standardised testing (previously the BST and now presumably the NAPLAN). Once the school allocation is determined, it is up to the school to distribute the STLD’s time amongst the children in that school.

My comments about the allocation are as follows:

1. There are not enough STLD allocated to schools overall.
2. The number of children with dyslexia (and other “low level” needs) are not formally identified by the school system (ie the school may know who is struggling but the DET does not know the total number of children with diagnosed and undiagnosed dyslexia (or dyspraxia, etc) at each school) The DET cannot know how many children are “missing out” because they don’t formally identify the children they classify as “language disorders with low support needs”.
3. A school may provide support to struggling children in K-3, but these children did not form part of the basis for the STLD allocation for the school (although this is the best age to start to intervene). Therefore, the support allocated for the children who do poorly on the NAPLAN (yr 3 and 5) is shared amongst the children from all years K-6.
4. To obtain learning support for my son requires constant advocacy by me (the parent) to the teachers and the principal. Not all parents have the capacity or skills to be an ever-present advocate for their child.
5. If a school improves its results in standardised testing, the level of STLD support will reduce. Individual students suffer when the school average goes up!
6. Teachers (and possibly even the STLD teachers) are not trained to know how to best help Dyslexic students. Different teachers suggest different strategies. It is doubtful whether the most up-to-date methods and assistive technologies are being implemented.

Summary: There is not enough funding of STLDs. Specific students and schools overall are not getting the allocation they need. Teachers are not getting the training they need.

Recent Media Attention on Literacy & Numeracy

There has been recent media coverage in relation to the NAPLAN, stating the “surprising under-performance” that a large number of students are falling below minimum standards and that the results are worsening from Year 3 to Year 9. (SMH 9 Jan 2010, Appendix B)

<http://www.smh.com.au/national/education/school-literacy-plan-is-failing-says-opposition-20100108-lyvf.html>

This result should not be surprising. Children with Dyslexia (a literacy and numeracy disorder) and other similar disorders (such as dyspraxia which also affects writing, spelling and numeracy) do not get the help they need at school. Without specific and targeted intervention, the literacy and numeracy “gaps” between Dyslexic students and average students will only get larger over time. Given that researchers often estimate that Dyslexia (in mild to severe forms) could affect up to 15% of people, the NAPLAN results are revealing.

Based on the most up-to-date worldwide research into brain-based language disorders, ideally, proper attention to Dyslexia would require **daily** (at least 1 hour each morning), **individual attention** (or at most groups of 2 to 4) using **specific modern teaching methods** (and modern assistive technologies) from immediately from Kindergarten when it can be identified, not after a student is 2 or 3 reading years behind. Given the type of intervention that is required, Dyslexia should be classified as **HIGH LEVEL SUPPORT NEED**.

Having Dyslexia in a print-based learning environment such as a primary school, is probably one of the highest categories of functioning disability you could have – not being able to read and/or write to a minimum level, completely restricts a child’s ability to learn from print and learn independently.

As a contrasting example, a child with high functioning autism or aspergers will have social and possibly behaviour issues (which will impact the school environment and also deserve funding), but quite often these children (if they don’t have dual disabilities) can, and do, read, and can, and do, learn and achieve academically. They are likely NOT the children in Band 1 of the literacy and numeracy statistics of the NAPLAN. Yet they receive more funding than children with Dyslexia.

In other words, funding should be focussed on functioning capacity not the “name of their disability”.

How should Funding be Spent?

The attached report “*Helping People with Dyslexia – A National Action Agenda*” gives some ideas for how extra funding for Dyslexia should be spent. Recommendations 5 to 10 relate specifically to schools and teachers.

In addition, the Inquiry should look at the report “*FIRST REPORT – May 2002 – Inquiry into the Provision of Public Education in NSW*” (“The Vinson Report”), in particular “*Chapter 9 – The Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Mainstream Classes*” which already identified a number of issues that this new Inquiry is looking at.

http://www.nswtf.org.au/general/files/FIRST_REPORT.pdf

Integration vs Special Schools

I am fully in support of inclusion and integrated schools. I like that my son can go to a local school. He is a normal, intelligent boy, in all respects except that he cannot read. He loves his school and his teachers. He contributes to the school community through sport and other non-literacy activities.

But he needs specific help for his Dyslexia. The seriousness of this has overtaken all other considerations. At this point (Yr 5), knowing what I know now about Dyslexia and the inadequate support through the school system, I would welcome the idea of specialist schools, or at least specialist classes within a school. There needs to be a specially trained teacher who can identify the children in Kindergarten, and then immediately implement the most effective evidence-based learning programs.

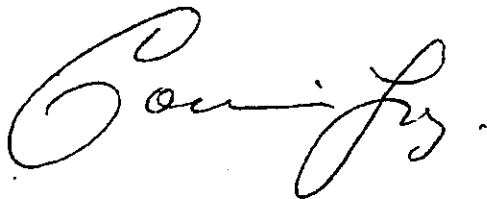
There shouldn't have to be:

- (i) "waiting lists for support"
- (ii) a hierarchy of who is "most behind" (ie access to Reading Recovery you must demonstrate being x-years behind and then "beg" for a place in the one-off 9 week program)
- (iii) parents left on their own to navigate the school system, and advocate for their individual child, year after year.
- (iv) the school worrying about how to retain STLD teachers if the NAPLAN results aren't bad enough
- (v) children left undiagnosed, and parents not being able to afford to get private speech therapy and occupational therapy help

The UK, Canada and the USA are way ahead of Australia in their recognition and support for children with Dyslexia and other neurological language disorders within the school systems. We should be able to learn from their experiences and put in place the appropriate education practices to support this significant group of students who have a disability but have been left behind.

I would be happy to discuss any of the matters raised in this letter.

Sincerely



Corinna Lueg

Appendix A Helping People with Dyslexia – A National Action Agenda
Appendix B Sydney Morning Herald – School Literacy article