Submission
No 313

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

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Submission for the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs inquiry.

We have a child with special needs. Declan who is now 10 years old, had many years with no explained diagnosis for his mild developmental delay. After seeing Professor Ouvrier at Westmead children's hospital a few years ago, he was diagnosed with severe dyspraxia as the root cause of his delay. Professor Ouvrier stated he had never seen a child displaying clinically obvious signs of dyspraxia on testing indicating that the Dyspraxia was the worst case he had ever seen.

Declan has been regularly monitored by a Pediatrician since birth, Speech therapists since 19months of age, Occupational therapists from 12 months of age and Physiotherapists from 7 months of age. Initially, health services provided were excellent, he received free health care for Physio, OT and Speech therapy with very small waiting times as he always seemed to be a priority case. Eg. He was not swallowing solids well making him a priority at Speech therapy. He continued with individual speech therapy until kindergarten when only a group therapy was offered to him after school once per week for a term. This provided 2 problems. Firstly, he was worse than most of the children in the group which therefore did not cater for his needs. Secondly he was exhausted after school and was therefore unable to concentrate. Initially we tried supplementing this group session with external private Speech Therapy. As it became clear that the group setting was providing very little support for him, we transferred to private speech therapy.

Declan was also well supported at Pre –School, receiving enough aid time. He qualified for the transition to school program which was good in that his future kindergarten teacher and some other teachers with key learning support positions in the school sat down with our speech therapist, pre-school teacher and us to discuss his needs. As he had an older brother already at the school he would attend, there was no need for Declan to visit the school prior to the normal kindergarten kinderlinks program.

I feel the follow up visits by the transition to school program to check on his progress during the transition period of 6 months were not beneficial. These funds would have been better spent in actual aid time.

In both kindergarten and year 1, Declan qualified for the Special classes provided for Speech, whereby you attend another school to have intensive speech teaching. That means his speech skills were in the bottom 1-2% of the state for his age. Unfortunately there was no place available for him to attend these few schools where these classes were provided. Even though his speech difficulties were recognized, no funds were available to assist him at school.

Declan continued his schooling with all his teachers crying out for aid time for him and receiving none.

Declan achieves well with one on one teaching and whilst we realise this is not possible in the real world, we do feel strongly that some aid time would have helped him considerably. This has been proved to us by his huge success with the Reading Recovery program. He went from a child in year one on a very low level ability of reading to a child reading level 24 on leaving the program in just 6 months. He is now a very competent reader - average for his age. We wish there was such a program for Maths, where he is still in the bottom 1-2%.

There came a time when Declan was in year 3 when we felt he was no longer coping at school. We had been told that no funding options were open to us. At this point my mother who is a retired Primary School teacher volunteered to help Declan at school for half a day per week. This was approved by our School principal and she continues to support him in this way at school. We also decided to employ a retired teacher from the school to give Declan 2 hours per week of Maths tuition again with the approval of our Principal. When I mentioned this to our School Councilor, he was horrified things had come to this and said we could apply for a Special Consideration funding which we did. I do not know why we had not been considered for this in the past. In year 4, Declan received 2 hours per week of teachers aid time the first in his entire school life. This has helped considerably. All the above support has helped Declan to feel much more confidant at school and his attitude to learning has become much more positive. We have been advised that Declan's funding will continue until the end of Primary School which is a big relief for us. Obviously whilst we are grateful for the 2 hours of funding we have received, we feel this is not nearly enough. We are still providing my mother and Mrs Brown, our retired school teacher.

As parents we have felt frustrated, despondent and angry at the lack of support for these children with special needs. Both our Pediatrician and Professor Ouvrier had written letters to be included with our applications for funding supporting the need for funding for Declan. Each time these applications were rejected. Without a formal diagnosis of Autism or Moderate Intellectual impairment, children are rarely given any funding. This is very distressing to parents who have children with just as significant problems but no diagnostic name. Who cares what the diagnosis is if your child is still unable to perform at a normal level? This is even harder to bear when higher-function children possessing a magic (when it comes to funding) Autism diagnosis are receiving assistance ahead of Declan.

Another issue we feel strongly about is that the teacher's aids we receive are untrained (as far as I am aware). Some are very good and helpful being natural teachers, however the majority are people with little skills in the area of teaching and especially teaching children with special needs who are capable of learning with good instruction. These children should have the highest quality teachers to achieve the best outcomes making this aid time constructive, not just babysitters with the best intentions.

Declan is a delightful, happy child who deserves the chance to succeed in learning and hence develop into someone who can support himself financially in the future. I realise this comes at an expense now for funding but firmly believe with this support he would be capable of supporting himself in the future alleviating the need for financial support for life.

Supporting your child through all the therapy, doctors visits, and tests is a huge expense and an emotional drain. Families that are struggling financially would definitely not be receiving the support that their child requires. If parents are unable to afford the cost of private therapy etc their child would be left to struggle through school on their own with little or no gain leading to an unhappy environment and a future long term burden to our society.

Yours sincerely

Kristen and Andrew Hayes