

Submission
No 194

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

Organisation: Condobolin Concerned Parents of Students with Special Needs
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Condobolin Concerned Parents of
Students with Special Needs

18th February, 2010

The Director
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
Sydney, NSW. 2000

Submission to the Inquiry; "The provision of education to students with a disability or special needs".

We the undersigned parents, all have children with special needs enrolled in a school in the small Central-West town of Condobolin. The following comments are made on the basis of our first-hand experience of working to gain the best outcomes for our children in these schools.

Terms of Reference No1. "The nature, level and adequacy of funding for the education of children with a disability."

We consider that there are issues of funding inadequacy, in regard to the nature of things that can be purchased with funding for special needs children. In our experience, there are specific areas of need, that school funding never seems to be able to address. In particular, we wish to highlight two specific areas of inadequacy:-

- a) Equipment recommended by Speech Therapists, Occupational Therapists & Physiotherapists. This refers to a wide range of items, including such things as Assistive & Augmentative Communication devices (AAC), appropriate computer games for motor skills development and stimulating/relaxing play equipment. It also refers to appropriate heating, cooling and floor coverings for the rooms utilised by students with significant sensory needs.
- b) Funding to support regular visits into classrooms, by staff with specialist skills. In addition to the full range of Therapy staff, this should include specialists in Autism, Behaviour management and Communication.

In our experience, schools generally indicate that they are not funded to provide these supports, which to us are essential to the proper support of our children. We are all forced to try to find funding and advice from non-school services. These generally require full cost recovery from families, and are often impossible to access directly in rural and remote communities.

Terms of Reference No.3 "The level and adequacy of current special education places within the education system."

From our experiences and knowledge of the Central-West region of NSW, there are only a small number of schools that have permanent Special Needs Units. These Units have funding for a finite number of students with a guaranteed allocation of special needs staff. Generally these Units also have some purpose-built or modified buildings.

For families such as ours, that live in a small community where the school has no fixed special needs funding, life is a lot less predictable for our children. We have talked with families living in larger centres that do have Special Needs Units, they do not seem to have the problems we have of renegotiating funding and A de time on a year by year basis.

Thus, we are of the opinion that the current level of special education funding actually contributes to inequity between families across NSW, depending on where they live. We would suggest that there be a minimum level of ongoing funding available to all students with identified special needs, irrespective of their school placement.

We would also like to indicate that we have observed that the current funding levels cause schools to treat special need students as a defined group. This means the school sometimes does not acknowledge the different situations the students non-disabled peers might be experiencing. In our local situation for example, Infant-aged and Primary-aged students with Special Needs are co-located in one classroom, but their peers operate in separate parts of the school. A similar situation is observed in the High school where Junior and Senior age disability students are worked together as a group, contrasting with the settings their peers work in.

Funding needs to be available to address this inequity.

Terms of Reference No.4 " The adequacy of integrated support services for children with a disability in mainstream settings, such as school classrooms"

Most of our children are integrated into mainstream settings for some of their time at school. From our experience, the inadequacy of supports for our children in these settings are indicated as follows:-

- a) The level of Aide support provided in mainstream is always significantly less than the disabled child receives in the special needs setting. This seems inappropriate to us, as it is the same student, whose support needs don't suddenly change from one setting to another. Resources to support additional Aide levels in mainstream settings is essential.
- b) Access to designated Support Teachers (STs) such as those for Hearing, Vision and Learning Difficulties appear to be too restrictive. An example from our local school is that one of our children has a hearing aid in one ear, but the ST Hearing cannot provide any support to him because the rules restrict her to supporting students with two hearing aids! From our perspective, if and when these specialist staff appear, they should be able to offer support to any student who could benefit. We believe these tight guidelines are in place to limit numbers, thus indicating inadequate funding levels.
- c) Many students with disabilities have difficulty writing and recording information. Thus they struggle to keep up in a mainstream class. Supportive technology such as laptops and speech recognition software would greatly assist these students. Generally, schools don't appear to have adequate funding to make such resources available to support these students in mainstream settings. This situation needs to be rectified.
- d) We would also like to suggest that some funding be made available to develop special needs awareness packages. These packages would be targeted at mainstream students, to increase their understanding of the issues confronting students with special needs and disabilities. This could greatly assist the success of mainstream integration programs.

Terms of Reference: No.5. “ The provision of a suitable curriculum for intellectually disabled and conduct disordered students .”

In our experience, many of the children defined above, actually have real areas of strength and have specific interests. To assist them to develop skills across all the Key Learning Areas (KLAs), they need to have a curriculum that is flexible enough to allow the individual students strengths and interests to be at the centre of their learning program. This means that teachers need to have the flexibility to attach the KLAs to the interest, not the other way around.

In practice this might mean that rather than have times set for Number or Writing, that these skills be integrated into a project of interest to the student. Teachers would need flexibility in the curriculum in order to design effective teaching programs for these students. It could also mean that if a student has competency in one skill, that one skill should be capable of ongoing development, irrespective of the students age or stage of schooling. In other words, there must be no limit set on the level a teacher can support a student to work at.

Terms Of Reference No.6. “Student and family access to professional support and services, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and school counsellors.”

In our part of rural NSW, the issue of access to professional support services is possibly the number one priority for us. There are times when there are no therapy services in our town at all, and most of the time there is very limited access to any therapists. Generally, families from our town need to travel a 400km round trip to access appropriate therapy services. The local schools generally never see therapists attending the school environment.

The school counsellor situation is also not effective, as mostly they are part-time and in recent years they have never been fully qualified or experienced people. In our experience, School Counsellors, apart from doing formal Assessments, generally do not see their role as significant for students with disabilities.

Most of the advice regarding therapy support, is accessed by families through the annual or six-monthly visits to Royal Far West Centre in Sydney. This is a great facility, but again they appear to be under-resourced, with an ever lengthening waiting list. We would like to suggest that a program be initiated whereby teams of therapists are allocated to areas across the state. These teams would then visit across a group of schools on a regular basis, so ensuring continuity and access to early intervention ideas when needed. This would ensure maximum value is gained out of reports and recommendations from outside specialist consultants such Royal Far West.

It is our experience that many of our children are waiting far too long for effective therapy programs to be implemented. This is also a frustration for teachers who often suspect a therapy related problem, but cannot act without the formal therapy plan.

Terms of Reference No.7. "The provision of adequate teaching training, both in terms of pre-service and ongoing professional training."

From our experience, Teachers and Aides both need to be trained across the full range of disability issues they may encounter in the classroom. Many school staff have done short courses in a particular disability, and then think they can apply those same principles across all disabilities. Training programs need to emphasise the broad range of tools available for special needs students, and that teachers need to select their tools in response to individual students. All students with special needs are different, irrespective of having the same diagnosis.

For effective support of our students, we want to know that teachers are focussed on working with the individual student. It is not effective teaching to simply accept that a child, who for example has Autism, should only need a teacher to follow any set of guidelines for teaching a student with Autism. Flexibility and individualised program development need to be emphasised to all teachers working in the area of special needs.

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