

Submission
No 177

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

Organisation: Public Service Association NSW

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KC:fs A09/1554

17 February 2010

The Director
General Purpose Standing Committee No 2
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

By Fax: 9230 3416

Dear Sir/Madam,

Inquiry into the Provision of Education to Students with a Disability or Special Needs

Please find enclosed the submission of the Public Service Association of NSW to the above inquiry.

The Association represents School Learning Support Officers who work for the Department of Education and Training in NSW Government Schools. School Learning Support Officers (SLSO) were formally known as Teachers' Aides.

These staff work with students with disabilities or special needs either one-on-one or in small groups under the direction of the teacher. The assistance provided by the SLSO can range from literacy and numeracy; to implementing behavioural programs; to assistance with toileting and health care needs.

In January 2010 the PSA undertook a survey of SLSOs based on the terms of the reference of the inquiry. The attached submission is based on their responses.

Should you wish for more information in relation to our submission please do not hesitate to contact Kris Cruden on 9220 0983.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Cahill', written over a white background.

**JOHN CAHILL
GENERAL SECRETARY**

Encl

**Submission to the Inquiry into the provision of
education to students with a disability
or special needs
by the
Public Service Association of NSW**

Attention: General Purpose Standing Committee No 2

Introduction

This submission is made by the Public Service Association of NSW representing and using information given to us by School Learning Support Officers (SLSOs) formerly known as Teachers Aides. This information was gained in a survey undertaken in January 2010 specifically addressing the terms of reference of the inquiry. These staff work in NSW Public Schools and work with small groups or one-on-one with students under the direction and guidance of Classroom Teachers. They undertake a broad range of duties from implementing behaviour management strategies; assisting with literacy, numeracy and comprehension to toileting; administering medications and undertaking health care procedures with students.

Our submission will make the point that the present level of resources is grossly inadequate to deal with the number of students with a disability or special needs who are enrolling in public schools. We will also make the point that the complexity of

needs of students is not taken into account when assessing students and therefore funding inadequacy is exacerbated.

In addition, students, teachers and parents need stability and certainty. Employing SLSOs on a permanent basis will assist with this certainty and will ensure educational outcomes are consistent. While many SLSOs have been employed consistently for 20 years or more the uncertainty of being temporary is a factor that raises concerns for parents and teachers (www.studentsneedus.org.au).

The nature, level and adequacy of funding for the education of children with a disability

Children with a disability are either enrolled in special settings - SSP Schools (Schools for Specific Purposes) or Support Units in mainstream Schools - or in regular classrooms in the mainstream setting.

Special Settings

Evidence supplied by our members who work in special settings demonstrates that the level of funding is not adequate to meet the needs of those students. In the special settings each class typically has a trained special education teacher. The class also has one or more permanent full time SLSOs. This allows the SLSO to get to know how the teacher works with the students and get to know the students themselves. The SLSO, in this setting, is familiar with the issues of each student and knows how to deal with those issues, thus allowing the teacher to provide education to all students.

Unfortunately, due to the complex nature of the disabilities of many students in special settings, the level of funding provided is often inadequate. For example, if a student or a number of students need assistance with toileting, while the SLSO is assisting that or those student/s with their toileting, the level of assistance available to other students in their class is not sufficient. This is not an unusual circumstance. In special units and special classes there are often numerous students who need one-on-one assistance of a personal, medical or health related nature. That said these settings are better resourced than mainstream settings.

Mainstream Settings

In a mainstream classroom setting the level of funding is grossly inadequate. The number of students with a disability enrolling in regular classrooms in mainstream settings is increasing every year. In addition, the complexity of the issues with which students present is also increasing. The funding provided to schools cannot keep pace with enrolments.

In mainstream settings students often present with multiple issues. The current nature of funding is that it is provided to students based on their assessed disability.

Unfortunately, not all students who need assistance are assessed. In addition, students are usually assessed on the level of their primary disability and funding is provided on this basis. The assessment rarely takes adequately into account the secondary, tertiary and subsequent disabilities. This leads to inadequate levels of funding. This is covered in more detail in the following section.

Typically, funding will be provided to employ a SLSO for a student for one (1) hour per day or for three (3) hours a day for three (3) days of the week. The student who is receiving assistance for one (1) hour per day is still enrolled for the remainder of every school day. The level of funding is often not enough to cover the cost of the SLSO assisting their student to complete even one learning task.

In addition, because there are usually more students in the class that need assistance than there is funding to assist them the SLSO will often work with students who do not specifically attract funding. This ensures the teacher is free to get on with the lesson for the rest of the class. It does not, however, ensure that the student who is funded receives adequate assistance and those students who are not funded at all but who also need help, are adequately assisted.

Finally, SLSOs work one-on-one with students with disabilities. It is often this one-on-one assistance that parents, teachers and students report is of most benefit in the learning environment. SLSOs develop a rapport with the students with whom they work. This enables them to know how to approach each new learning experience with the student to achieve the best outcome. Many SLSOs work with the same student for a number of years. Unfortunately SLSOs in mainstream settings, funded under the integration program, are all long-term temporary employees. Some of them have been temporarily employed for over 20 years. The nature of this funding being provided annually increases insecurity. The SLSO and the student with whom they work do not know from one year (sometimes from one term) to the next if they will continue to be employed. This lack of security is disadvantageous to the students and to the SLSO.

Most students with disabilities thrive with certainty and assistance. They need the certainty that their SLSO can be with them permanently if that is what is needed. SLSOs should be employed permanently and then when a student moves on the experience, knowledge and training of the SLSO is not lost to the Department of Education and Training and another student can be the beneficiary.

Best practice approaches in determining the allocation of funding to children with a disability, particularly whether allocation should be focussed on a student's functioning capacity rather than their disability

Currently funding support in public schools is calculated on formulas. Disability Confirmation Sheets confirm students' primary, secondary, tertiary and subsequent disabilities. Each disability and the severity of the disability has a rating, thus identifying the primary disability. Whilst secondary, tertiary and subsequent disabilities are considered, the primary disability remains the focus for allocation of funding.

The complexity, impact and interplay (interaction) of secondary, tertiary and subsequent disabilities on the functioning capacity of students is not taken into account when assessing the level of funding and therefore current funding inadequacy is exacerbated.

For example, a student testing as having a moderate intellectual disability may also have behaviour difficulties, physical disability, emotional disorder, mental health

issues or autism, which acting together, can impact markedly on the student's day to day functioning capacity.

Feedback from the PSA survey of SLSOs shows consistently expressed concern at this segmented (compartmentalised) approach to the provision of funding support, with ongoing pleas for functional assessment of students. SLSOs believe that assessment of the "whole" child and their ability to function, considering all presenting disabilities, across the range of educational settings, would provide a better and more realistic measure of the assistance required for the student.

The report undertaken by the Public Schools Principals Forum supports this feedback from SLSOs (PSPF, 2009). Their report showed that Principals and Teachers consistently report that the complexity of student issues is not properly taken into account when funding is calculated.

Finally, there are students in most classrooms who need additional one-on-one assistance to enable them to learn and to prevent their issues disrupting the rest of the class. An SLSO in every classroom would ensure that these students (and indirectly all students) would have an easier path to learning.

The level and adequacy of current special education places within the education system

The feedback from our survey of SLSOs shows that special education places in units and in special schools are better funded and resourced than those in mainstream schools. However, even in special settings the level and adequacy is not sufficient.

There are a number of reasons for this, many of which are detailed in the preceding two sections. They are the issues with secondary (and other) difficulties not being properly taken into account and the complexity of health and behavioural issues with which students are presenting.

In mainstream settings while special education places are funded the funding is grossly inadequate. SLSOs report to us and it is confirmed by the findings of the PSPF Report (PSPF, 2009) that students are often only funded for 1 hr a day, 3 days a week when they are in need of assistance all the time.

The adequacy of integrated support services for children with a disability in mainstream settings, such as school classrooms

These support services are available however they are too few, not integrated and reliant on the energy of local staff in accessing them.

Our SLSOs report that when support is provided by behaviour specialists, learning assistance teachers and others it is of great assistance. However, these specialists, who work over a number (or many) schools, are overstretched. In addition, in regional areas a large portion of the time of specialists is spent travelling from one school to another. A larger pool of specialists with some based in each district would improve the services.

Due to the shortage of services and the large numbers of schools and students that have to be covered the services are not properly integrated. If there were teams of specialists working out of every district office co-ordination could be more easily organised and resourced.

Access to these specialists depends on the energy and persistence of local staff in lobbying to ensure that the specialists visit the particular school or student needing the assistance. There are not enough resources devoted to ensuring that these support services are available.

The provision of a suitable curriculum for intellectually disabled and conduct disordered students

There are modified curricula available for students with disabilities. SLSOs work with the teacher to implement the curriculum most appropriate for each student. Unfortunately, feedback from SLSOs informs us that the implementation is inconsistent across schools.

The Department of Education and Training does not appear to consistently monitor the implementation of the curriculum. Also, teachers, depending on the adequacy of their training, are often unsupported.

Student and family access to professional support and services, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and school counsellors

SLSOs inform us that where students and family are able to access these services, the quality of the services provided are good. Unfortunately, the waiting lists for services are very long and some parents do not even know the services exist. In addition, due to under-funding and sometimes the remoteness of schools, there is often little follow-up of the services that have been provided. This often leaves SLSOs to implement programs without the ongoing support and review from the qualified health care professional.

The assistance provided by school counsellors, for example, is praised by SLSOs however there are not enough of them to assist all those in need. Assistance from practitioners of other disciplines (speech therapy, occupational therapy etc) is very difficult to obtain. This seems mainly due to a lack of availability of trained practitioners. The reason for this is not clear. What is clear from reports by SLSOs is that access is more difficult than it was five to ten years ago.

The provision of adequate teaching training, both in terms of pre-service and ongoing professional training

In special settings SLSOs report that the teachers with whom they work almost all have special education training. However, in mainstream settings there is less consistency of training. In both settings SLSOs report that casual teachers are usually untrained in special education and rely on the SLSOs in the class to a large degree.

Training for teachers, post-qualification and on an ongoing basis, appears to be inconsistently provided or accessed across the Department of Education and Training.

Any other related matters

Training for SLSOs - SLSOs are unable to consistently access training across the board. Some SLSOs report that they are regularly offered training by their Principal (or Head Teacher), however, many others report they are never informed about training. The Department of Education and Training does not take any overall responsibility for, provision of or access to, ongoing training for SLSOs. Training is left to local arrangements.

When SLSOs attend training their school has to provide a replacement for that person. The school budget consequently has to pay for the cost of the training, the cost of the SLSO salary and the cost of the casual relief SLSO. This training is not separately funded by the Department and the cost is a huge disincentive for schools to encourage SLSOs to take up training opportunities.

Many SLSOs report that they undertake training in their own time and at their own expense. However, this again adds to the inconsistency of the levels of training of staff.

If SLSOs were permanent employees then the benefit of any training they undertake would be retained within the Department of Education and Training. This would benefit present and future students.

Inclusion of SLSOs in Learning Support Teams within schools would improve the quality and delivery of education to students with a disability. At present schools have Learning Support Teams who meet to decide how best to assist each student with a disability or special need. This team is usually made up of Principal, School Counsellor, Head Teacher, Support Teacher Learning Assistance, Teacher and in some cases the School Learning Support Officer. The SLSO works closely with students. It would be of benefit to students to ensure that the SLSO is always part of the Learning Support Team.

In addition, SLSOs need to be involved in all communications within their schools about matters which affect the students with whom they work. This is another area of inconsistency. In some schools SLSOs are included and in others they are not. It would benefit students if schools were required to make it a priority ensure SLSOs were a functioning part of the Learning Support Team.

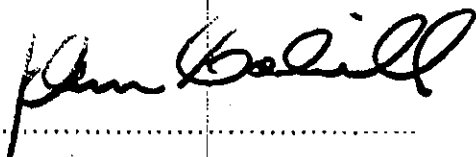
Permanency for long term temporary School Learning Support Officers – Most SLSOs in mainstream settings are not permanent staff. This creates insecurity for the staff members because they do not know from one term or one year to the next if they will be employed. It also leaves students and parents uncertain and insecure about the provision of future assistance.

Most students with disabilities thrive with certainty and assistance. They need the certainty that their SLSO can be with them permanently if that is what is needed. SLSOs should be employed permanently and then when a student moves on the experience, knowledge and training of the SLSO is not lost to the Department of Education and Training and another student can be the beneficiary.

Bibliography

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www.studentsneeds.org.au ; Public Service Association of NSW; Website demonstrating thoughts and concerns of parents, teachers and SLSOs regarding Special Education; Established 2009



John Cahill, General Secretary

Public Service Association of NSW