

Submission
No 199

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

Organisation: Best Buddies Australia

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Building friendships
Changing Lives

Best Buddies Australia
Building Friendships, Changing Lives

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Submission: Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs.

The educators of young people, who have an intellectual disability, demonstrate on a daily basis expertise, dedication and passion. Significant efforts are made to provide a high quality learning experience for young people in what is at times, a challenging environment. However as understanding of the needs of those with an intellectual disability in the broader community develops, so to the nature of support for these young people must evolve. The development of real and meaningful Socially Inclusive practices is the next step in this education process.

About Best Buddies Australia

Best Buddies Australia (BBA) is a not for profit organisation that works with young people who have an intellectual disability or a developmental delay. We match a young person who has a disability with an age related peer, supporting a one to one friendship. BBA encourages this Buddy Pair to meet twice a month and contact each other once a week. We provide ongoing training, support, leadership and monitoring to assist with the development of a mutually enriching one to one friendship.

The core goal of this program is the meaningful participation and social inclusion of those who have a disability into the wider community. Other program outcomes include the development of socialisation and adaptive skills, the development of networks and the creation of positive peer relationships. We observe an increase in self esteem and confidence and contribute to greater life outcomes for all our participants.

BBA has operated in Australia for the past 5 years and currently is active in 7 High Schools across Sydney. The program itself has a curious relationship with the NSW education system. While not sitting within any specific curriculum area, BBA believes it adds significant value to the inclusion of young people at participating schools.

The program is essentially run by volunteers, both teachers and students, supported by Best Buddies Program staff. The majority of the programs outcomes are achieved though contact outside of normal school hours; however it is the schooling system that provides an access point to young people with and without intellectual disabilities. As such, BBA's program design requires each active school to have a mainstream and a special needs/education unit co-existing on the same grounds from which young people are recruited and teaching staff engaged.

It is the relationship between BBA and the Education system to offers a unique view of how young people with an intellectual disability are socially included.



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Best Buddies Australia has observed that many Principals, Teachers and Support staff have difficulty implementing socially inclusive practices. An absence of clear definition, policy, practice approaches and appropriate support structures limits the meaningful participation of students with an intellectual disability in the broad school community. This lack of structure stifles the functional capacity of students both while at school and in the years following, leading to ongoing social isolation, lack of educational and employment opportunities, and poor life outcomes for students with an intellectual disability.

Ron: 'I used to sit at home all the time but now me and Josh are going out and doing bowling and movies and everything'¹

Young people with an intellectual disability are often socially isolated for several reasons. These may include lack of opportunity, lack of social skills, unspoken prejudices or even practical issues such as lack of money.

BBA operates with the knowledge that the vast majority of young people within the special education system have few, if any real friends. While a confronting statement, this is true for virtually all of young people who are referred to our program. It is important to note that many young people with an intellectual disability may present as very capable and proactive in the development of friendships, however upon investigation many of these relationships are surface and limited in nature.

It is true that a growing number of children with intellectual disabilities spend part of their day in general education classrooms; however, for most, acceptance and full participation in the social community of the school, which have long been central to the definition of inclusion...remains elusive.²

¹ Fletcher, J. (2009) Enhancing Lives, Building Friendships – Outcomes of young people engaged in Best Buddies Australia High Schools Program UTS Research Project – Unpublished at this time.

² Siperstein, G. et al (2009) Social Inclusion of Children With Intellectual Disabilities in a Recreational Setting, Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Vol 47, Number 2: 97-107



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BBA has observed through discussions with all our participant schools; that a real and functional understanding of social inclusion is difficult to identify. Indeed for the majority of the schools that we work with, while there is discussion about the principles of social inclusion, the common practice is more akin to community participation.

BBA defines Social Inclusion as the meaningful participation of a young person with an intellectual disability or developmental delay in all aspects of school and community life. This includes academic, sporting, cultural, religious, economic, political and social dimensions. The development of meaningful, mutually enriching friendships is a core component of a socially inclusive school community.

BBA differentiates social inclusion from community participation.

Socially inclusive practices bring the expectation of mutual responsibility. This is far beyond the passive engagement that is present in school excursions, or simply sitting next to a student from the mainstream setting.

Why is social inclusion important?

Ignoring the broad moral and ethical arguments relating to Social Inclusion, the link between peer relationships and academic achievement is well established.³ Put simply, if you have a good network of peers and friends students tend to perform better at school, have better employment opportunities and understand career paths, seek ongoing learning opportunities and in general have better life outcomes.

Social Inclusion and the subsequent engagement within the school networks is significant as it provides an invaluable support required when young people with an intellectual disability transition from High School into the 'non-school' community. Unfortunately, for people with an intellectual disability this transition presents many challenges.

People with an intellectual disability are less likely to successfully transfer into the labour force than their same age peers without a disability.⁴ People with disabilities are also more likely to lose contact with familiar contacts such as teachers, friends as well as lose routines that have supported their life experience for many years.

³ Wentzel et al (2004) Friendships in Middleschool: Influences on Motivation and School Adjustment, Journal of Educational Psychology:96 (2) 195-203

⁴ (AIHW 2008 Disability in Australia: intellectual disability; Bulletin 67, November 2008).



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*'The ability to perform work tasks is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of success at work, with social and interpersonal skills underpinning the structure as much more significant predictors of workplace success.'*⁵

Through ongoing social contact, young people engaged with our program develop the necessary skills to not only relate to their peers but develop a greater understanding of mutual responsibilities in social interactions.

Key recommendations

- BBA believes students with an intellectual disability would significantly benefit if the NSW Department of Education developed and promoted a Social Inclusion Strategy. This strategy should include the development of a functional definition, creation of an accessible policy, the ability to discuss active practice approaches and appropriate funding support.
- It is recommended that the NSW Department of Education create space within its current curriculum for a Social Inclusion Module, incorporating broad principles of inclusion. This module should be delivered to all students in an age appropriate manner.
- BBA recommends that Department of Education staff be actively encouraged to engage with support services that assist with the development of socially inclusive behaviours. This includes the provision of funds for teacher hours to be dedicated to such programs.
- BBA recommends that school Principals be actively encouraged and supported in the provision of Social Inclusive practice.

Submitted by:

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18 February 2010

⁵ Holmes et al (2000) Handling small talk at work: Challenges for workers with intellectual disabilities; International Journal of Disability, Development and Education, Vol 47 No. 3