

Submission
No 80

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

Name: Name Suppressed
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Partially Confidential

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In February 2003 my partner and I moved from the UK with our two children to start a new life in Australia. Our son was two, and our daughter was five. We rented an apartment in Lane Cove, NSW, and were looking forward to the future.

However, we began to have serious concerns about development, and in June 2003, he was diagnosed with Autism. We immediately researched the options in terms of Intensive Early Intervention and enquired about the services that were available, and were shocked to find that nothing was provided by the State for Autistic children, apart from a couple of hours of advice from Aspect, which had a waiting list of over a year. We knew from our research that best hope of making progress was intensive early intervention, and the program with the best evidence was ABA (Applied Behavioural Analysis).

Even with us doing much of the teaching ourselves, the ABA program still cost us about \$25,000 a year, which we could not possibly have found from my partner's modest income. We struggled financially and had to ask our elderly parents and other relatives for money. We were appalled that there was no government-funded educational support for our son.

Meanwhile the severity of our son's condition was becoming apparent, and he was later diagnosed with moderate/severe intellectual disability. He needed constant 1:1 support and we were completely drained and rapidly going broke trying to help him.

When my son was five, we could no longer afford full-time ABA at home, and started looking into the options for schooling. We contacted the Education Department who suggested we contact the local Special School. When we did so, we were told that their staffing ratio was eight children to one staff member, and that they would not be able to cater for need for one-to-one support. These staffing ratios seemed to be fixed and took no account of the needs of the children.

The only option open to us was to plead with Giant Steps in Gladesville to take . I think they had 60 students and a waiting list of around 300 at the time. Giant Steps is a wonderful specialist Autism School which provides children with the level of support that they need, so it was a big relief to us that was offered a place, and he started in 2005. However, Giant Steps is an Independent School, which depends on a massive amount of fundraising in order to keep going. It was a huge additional pressure on parents to have to raise the sums needed, and particularly difficult for families like ours who were not wealthy and did not have the right connections.

In 2006, my partner and I were completely exhausted from caring for , and combined with financial pressures and the constant need for fundraising for Giant Steps, we felt we were at breaking point and could not go on. We decided reluctantly that our only hope of staying together as a family was to return to the UK. This was, and remains to this day, a very sad decision. We had really wanted to make our lives in Australia, we had made some good friends and my daughter was happy and doing very well at school. But due to the lack of State educational support for our son, we felt we were left with no choice.

We returned to the UK in August 2006 and now live in Oxford. Our son now attends the local Special School. Due to a law in this country which says that every child must receive an “appropriate education”, our son now receives the 1:1 support he needs. An Autism Specialist (ABA supervisor) comes into the school every two weeks and spends three hours with the staff, training and supporting them to meet needs. I should stress that all children do not automatically receive this level of support. The big difference is the law which gives children the right to have the education they need, so once we were able to demonstrate level of need, this was provided.

This is in stark contrast to the NSW system, which seems to provide a “one size fits all” education policy for disabled children. The provision is minimal and fixed, so where the child

to disabled to fit the system, the family is forced to make their own educational arrangements. Educating disabled children is expensive, and the more severe the disability, the greater the cost. I find it truly shocking that severely disabled children are abandoned by the State, and their hard-pressed, exhausted parents are left with no choice but to try to fund extremely expensive private education themselves.

The New South Wales government might see cases like ours as a success for their policy. After all, by failing to provide appropriate education for our son we have been forced out of the country and are no longer a burden. And we're not the only ones. I know of other NSW families who have moved to the UK so that their children can receive an appropriate education. The fact that disabled children are being forced out of a wealthy country for want of a decent education is something the government should be thoroughly ashamed of. It is a large ugly stain on Australia's reputation that disabled children suffer such discrimination.

The NSW education system needs to completely rethink the education system for disabled children, which is not fit for purpose. Disabled children, however severely disabled, should have the same right to appropriate government-funded education as the rest of the population. The overriding concern must be the needs of the child, and the government should commit to giving disabled children the level of educational support they need in order to maximise their potential.