

Submission
No 24

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

Name: Mr Dominic Witcom

Date received: 27/01/2010

The provision of education to students with a disability or special needs (Inquiry)

The Director
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2
Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000
Fax: (02) 9230 3416

SUBMISSION

The main problem in NSW with funding for students with disabilities lays not so much with the level or adequacy but with schools' perception of the funding process, and the way in which the funding is used. High quality educational planning is not always evident in the way funding is expended. There is a low level of accountability in relation to the way schools use funding for students with special needs.

There are various instruments or mechanisms for systematically determining a student's functioning capacity in key areas of education and development. Such processes are used by education providers around the world to deliver educational services to children with disabilities. The focus of these processes can vary. Most of them focus on the level of resourcing needed to support a student with a disability. This is determined by describing the level functioning of the student in key areas of learning, such as communication, mobility or social skills for example. Once the level of functioning is determined then a formula can be applied that then delivers a level of funding to that student.

What is missing in this equation is a rigorous description of what educational planning needs to be completed by the school. Clear appraisal of the student's level of functioning should be matched with an expected level or quality of educational planning. This high quality planning requirement would be a means of making schools more accountable in the way they use funding. So for example, each specified level of appraisal of student functioning would be linked to a funding level, and a level or quality of standardized educational planning which incorporates systematic monitoring and review of student achievement over a period of time.

Such mechanisms should articulate a clear framework for positive, standardised and achievable educational planning that schools can follow. Funding should be linked directly to high quality educational planning and to outcomes that can be and are, measured and achieved. Such planning mechanisms should apply at macro (IEP) levels, and at micro (daily program) levels.

Currently the accessing of additional funding for special needs is perceived by schools as an end in itself. Special needs funding should not be an end in itself but a means to an end. Once a student's capacity has been assessed, then high quality educational planning should be carried out before funding can be accessed. This high quality planning should be standardized across schools, and should be monitored and evaluated.

Funding should be procedurally linked to educational planning. In this way, levels of funding is then directly linked to the processes of planning, monitoring, review and reporting in special education, for which schools should be more accountable.

Funding for special needs should not be focused on categories or types of disability. Funding should be based on accurate and systematic descriptions of performance or functioning in key educational or developmental domains. Leveled descriptors should represent a realistic indication that can be referenced to a student's abilities, skills and learning behaviours.

The current system of operation and placement in NSW special education facilities is problematic because it is categorical in its approach. While some facilities need to be purpose built to support students with physical disabilities or medical conditions, school-based learning support units and classes should have the capacity to place and support a range of students. The focus of support classes should be to give students the skills and knowledge necessary to access the regular curriculum and the regular school environment. The focus should be on transition. There should be an expectation that most students will eventually complete their education outside the support class, in the regular education environment.

There is currently no definitive comprehensive curriculum for students with disabilities in NSW schools. Educational planning is carried out in the form of individualized education planning IEP. Teachers develop educational programs in consultation with parents and families, and by adapting the regular curriculum outcomes. A specific and comprehensive curriculum should be designed for children with disabilities and conduct disorders. This curriculum should have congruence with the regular curriculum which is articulated in staged outcomes.

Student and family access to professional support and services is limited with resources being spread too thinly, and being of a low quality. In my experience, access to such services is intermittent at best, making the services to students so infrequent as to be ineffective. In order to be effective, services such as physiotherapy and speech therapy for example, need to be frequent and sustained, otherwise they are of little benefit. A model of resourcing and operation should be developed to enable frequent and sustained access to high quality support services.

In my view, the quality of preservice training for teachers in special education is adequate. However, on-going professional training and development is inadequate and of very low quality. Teachers are not required to maintain or develop their skills. In other countries it is mandated that teachers complete a specified number of professional development hours during the school year. Such training and development activities are provided by universities or other professional bodies, ensuring a high level of quality. This is not the case in NSW. On the contrary, in the special education field in NSW some teachers and support staff hold the view that they have a job for life. They do the same work each year delivering the same programs at the same standard, with very little change. Furthermore, regular education teachers are not required to develop or maintain special education skills. Generally, teachers are not accountable to maintain significant or appropriate pedagogical skills in special education.

Dominic Witcom

I have more than fifteen years as a special education teacher. I have worked in NSW and overseas. I currently work in a large comprehensive secondary school in Hong Kong.