

Submission  
No 107

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

**Name:** Ms Caroline Dooley

**Date received:** 15/02/2010

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Caroline Dooley

13<sup>th</sup> February 2010

I am writing in regard to the NSW government's public enquiry into provisions of education to students with a disability or special needs.

I am a school learning support officer and have been working with special needs students in primary and high schools for 13 and half years now and would like to express my concerns over the issues involved with schools, students and their families.

I am very supportive of students with disabilities being integrated into mainstream schools on most occasions. However, it doesn't always work and there are many students who would be better supported in a special school or support unit environment. To try and obtain a placement for these students is exceedingly difficult as there are so many students on the waiting lists and not enough special schools or support units to meet the demand. In the meantime schools have to cope with insufficient resources and lack of knowledge and training to be able to assist these students in quality learning.

Along with supporting the students in the classroom much of the support teachers, learning support officer's and executive staff's time is spent dealing with emotional/ mental health and behaviour issues in a counselling type of role.

There is an ever increasing number of students with mental health problems, and to see this in our schools is quite disturbing. These young ones are not getting enough support and this often has a detrimental affect on them and others in the classroom. Students have minimal learning when they are dealing with anxiety, depression, trauma or disordered thoughts and perceptions and it is distressing to think that some will leave school with inadequate skills to be able to lead a productive life.

My experience is that many schools have at least 4- 6 students with either disabilities or special needs in each class. The disabilities may include physical, mental health, autism spectrum disorders, mild to moderate intellectual disabilities and behaviour disorders within a large class setting. Some of these classes have approximately 28-30 students and it is progressively harder for teachers to maintain a healthy environment for students to learn. Actual support in the classroom for these children may only equate to a few hours a week which is insufficient to meet their needs.

As most will be aware there are also a large number of students undiagnosed with special needs. This makes the school's position even more difficult as there is no funding for these students, yet they are still at school to learn and go unsupported in the classroom.

Support teacher's in schools have a huge responsibility and not enough resources or time to get through their workload. They are working incessantly to give these students the best possible support and also educate staff on ways of managing these students in the classroom along with arranging meetings with parents and other professionals, organising submissions for students who would have their needs better met at a support class or special school. They also liaise with doctors and other professionals to gain more information on the student's difficulties and needs.

Although I have been working as a learning support officer for 13 and half years my position is not permanent. I do believe that all schools should have at least one permanent learning support officer. We are not teachers, however the interaction we have with individual students and the knowledge

and experience we have of special needs, we are an important asset to the school and one which is integral to the support of students with disabilities and special needs. We build trust and rapport with many students, who share their concerns and experiences with us allowing a more stable learning ground, assisting them to see their strengths and improve their schooling and self image. However, the allocated support is insufficient. Student's are asking for help and are often disappointed when we tell them we are unable to support in their class.

Schools need increased funding for students with special needs or disabilities to enable them to meet their potential both academically and emotionally. It is not just about the students academic success, much of the time it is their emotional state that needs to be addressed first before they can develop the capacity to learn successfully and in this light there should be more training for teachers, learning support officers and other staff. There needs to be more school counsellors, support teachers and other professionals such as social workers and occupational therapists available to schools. School learning support officers should be given permanent positions with a more secure future and acknowledgement of their experience and value in education.

There is also a lack of information and support for parents. Schools spend much of the time trying to get parents to agree to have a child assessed or to give their support and permission for the child to be given a position at a special school. It is very frustrating for the staff when they come up with parents who appear not to be supporting their child. However, I really think that much of the time it is a lack of information and/or understanding. It would be beneficial for an independent person to liaise with parents and offer information on all avenues and support networks available to them and their child. Many parents have other problems that they are dealing with or they have little understanding of their child's specific requirements, and this needs to be addressed.

Education is a joint responsibility of parents/caregivers, the school, government and the student and all need to be in accord to create a synergy for the greatest outcome of that child's learning and well-being.

Yours Sincerely

Caroline Dooley  
School Learning Support Officer