Submission No 18

INQUIRY INTO STUDENTS WITH A DISABILITY OR SPECIAL NEEDS IN NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOLS

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Personal submission

To the committee

I welcome this opportunity to make submission to your inquiry and look forward to expanding on it in person at a hearing if required. I am passionate about the needs of children with a disability or special needs both at a personal and systemic level and have had experience at working in both areas.

I am the parent of four children, three of whom have a mental health diagnosis and two have co- morbities that include Autism, for my submission I will concentrate on the my youngest at school and my experiences navigating education with them and the anecdotal information I have from talking with and supporting individually other families who I know with students with a disability or special needs.

My children have all attended NSW Public Schools in regional and remote locations and I have been a parent of a school age child since 2000 and will continue to be until 2020, during our educational journey we have personally accessed many services provided by the Department of Education including; early entry assessment and counsellor assessment, eGats support, two placements in selective high stream, early intervention, two lots of reading recovery, regional behavioural support, serious incident reports and RRRP funding, absconding from school and running across the new England highway, Medication mismanagement, individual support from the regional APLA for reading support, LAP funding support, an SLSO for three hours per day, an incident of NAPLAN cheating with the reader and writer, with the introduction of ESES, continued individualised funding support, falling off support at transition to high school without an appeal ability, so far 19 scheduled individual education plan meetings, wellbeing support, , support from the LaST, an adjusted and differentiated curriculum, a failed attempt to enter a support class due to missing information, a ministerial and local member intervention, a support class placement in the MC class at the high school, a failed attempt to access transport again due to the absence of critical information, which was successfully appealed with just adding the data and knowing the reasons that you can have assisted transport. I also have had to put in complaints and have been sent an email by a former Principal now director regarding my son and my concerns on departmental email a letter that in part read "if you are so unhappy with our support for your son, while we will miss him we won't miss you, your constant malcontent, your lack of respect and bulldozer tactics" (6 Feb 2011).

In my volunteer capacity I have also sat on Regional Placement Panel, the DEC working group on the Illawarra trial of modified support that was the precursor to ESES and resulted in the Westwood Spice report, Parent rep for four years on the state assisted transport appeals panel, the then DG advisory group for Special Education as P&C rep, I was the chair of the NSW P&C Fed Special Education Subcommittee for six years, and a member of that committee for ten years, I have been the P&C rep on two interview panels for a Teacher and a Principal at SSP.

As a support person and a friend I have helped other with what documents they require to provide as evidence of any claim they are making to support their child, have attended as an independent witness transition meetings for students.

I feel that these life experiences give much validity to my submission on this topic at this time.

A. Equitable access to resources for students with a disability or special needs in regional and metropolitan areas.

Our family has moved from remote areas and regional ones ostensively to access educational opportunities for our children. My second daughter with ASD and a mental health diagnosis went to school a year early as there was no other options for her in the remote community we lived in and she has a GERRIC SB5 assessed IQ 165 so she does have special needs she struggled in adapting to the pace of education and would refuse to attend and would stay home instead, her primary years she “worked up” but as such small cohort there was often only one class of the year she was in at the local schools.

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without the principal at the school she would not have completed her HSC or gotten into university, and her attendance level possibly made her HSC hours hard but the amazing school and core teachers just stuck by her and she has now completed her first year at Uni after doing a gap year at MacDonald’s, in Communications and Media and Business double degree.

My son started school after accessing Early Intervention and additional supports at preschool, he had to travel via taxi at 4 years old to access the EI class as the closest one was in another town and 26 km from our home. He had great support in that class and it made a significant difference to his start to formal education as well as the wrap around allied therapies that we took him to prior to his entry to school.

Any services supplied to the town we lived in have to come from another town, in 2007 when my son was in kindergarten he required the support of the regional autism outreach teacher however as she was based in Tamworth 95km away he was not placed on her case load as she “didn’t go up the hill” this lack of access was something that I have witnessed both personally and for other families, that tyranny of distance to access the supports required. There is also less ability to access supports as people with specialist skills required often don’t stay in or are not attracted in the first place to non-metropolitan locations. This sadly is not confined to Education but also to the allied services that would make education better for these students.

My son was unable to access a reading class as it was in another town and the disruption to the rest of his education was deemed too great, he also was not able to access literacy support via the centre for effective reading as the disruption to the family unit would have been too great, so consequently he in year 8 is still unable to spell his name.

A child that is in my sons MC class who I am aware of and his mum is my friend, is in need of the specialist SSP support of a BD/ED class and is on his way to expulsion even from the MC class as his behavioural issues are so significant, however he is only in year seven and the closest class is over 130km each way, approximately a three hour drive round trip each day to the support needed for this boy, not something that is possible without the family moving.

I am aware of another family close to us who moved from a town of 10000 800km away to access the classes needed for their autistic children and where they could find employment and housing, they left a senior school child in the care of grandparents to complete school, and have moved from family and friend support networks.

B.The impact of the Government's 'Every Student Every School' policy on the provision Of education to students with a disability or special needs in New South Wales public school

To start with my son was funded at a level higher than ESES so did not access the support, however what we did notice was that due to experienced and specialist being placed back at schools for ESES under the LaST system less support and advice was available to teachers at school to scaffold the learning of students with high level support needs. So as a parent all I saw of the higher level of support was more SLSO time for him, which was often shared with other children piggybacking on his funding, so not always as dedicated to the support needs of the individual child requiring that higher level support, and not always used to upskill teachers, If you were lucky enough to have the specialist required at your school it worked well but for schools that had regional staff that returned to school with other fields of expertise they were not as useful.

When went from year6 to 7 he had a transitional meeting to review his funding, and one of his co-morbidities was accidentally left off his paediatrician's letter. This created a situation where he did not meet the domains of disabilities that require a score to evaluate the level of need for students, as a consequence of this he was at his transition meeting, the DGO sent the paperwork to state disabilities unit and was given "informal advice" that he wouldn't be eligible to access a review at regional placement panel, who determine individual level funding or support class placement. As this was informal advise it could not be appealed, and as it had been given he missed being considered at the placement panel, which if he had accessed and been unsuccessful we would have had an opportunity to appeal the decision, and if unsuccessful would have known that we at least would have done all we could to support our son, however this way there was no way to dispute the decision of the Department. I called the student services office in Sydney to be told there are lots of kids worse off than my son, that may be true, but this is a sad indictment on the system and it isn't the attitude you want from people who are in charge of disability services in the department.

During year 7 year he was mainstreamed and had only support provided via ESES. The LaST started well and we had a plan in place that we as parents were happy with, he did additional transitional days and had a place to go to if he was stressed as he is a runner and a flight risk, and the school has no fences.

The regional student services person attended the IEP meeting along with the principal and the LaST. Supports offered to were a laptop with talk to text technology, that teachers would differeniate the curriculum and that he would be supported as required. He was part of a withdrawal program using technology to support his very low literacy skills.

However very few of the teachers made time or were given time and support to properly integrate the differentiations required to support half way through the year we met again with the principal and the LaST, with copies of work from school including assessment tasks. The technology had not yet been provided, and some of the differentiations included the English teacher running a highlighter over the important words, given that had at the time a literacy level at the end of stage one and he was in stage four, this would be laughable if it wasn't so desperately important that he had support.

While we found the principal fantastic and very supportive, his staff passed the buck, the LaST saying it was the classroom teachers job to do the differentiation and the classroom teachers saying that they needed the LaST's support to do that. As a parent it isn't my job to tell the school how to do their job but it is my job to make sure that they do do it and I have often felt through education that he has been very let down by the system.
During that year we also had do the NAPLAN test without support as when he attempted it in year 5 he had a reader and when he had the answer wrong he said that the scribe had moved his hand to the correct answer, when I told the school this they investigated and said was lying. was then in trouble at school as I had created waves. However his NAPLAN results in 2015 were where we thought he was in literacy- right at the bottom, and at a meeting I was at after his 2015 results were received, I spoke with the local executive director about this issue, either wasn't a liar, and the scribe had cheated in his NAPLAN or his value add from school had dropped significantly. I formally wrote as requested by Frank Potter to Frank Potter about this as the local Director was the principal at his primary school at the time is now the local director, I wrote this email 25/8/15 and still have not had a reply from him regarding my concerns.

Towards the end of 2015 an MC class was formed at the school already attended and we applied for him to attend. He was unsuccessful in his placement in the class and we when we questioned this none of his attendance data, nor his co-morbidities were considered, neither had any of the numbers in the domains required had been filled out by the LaST, meaning that important information was missing from his application. After writing via the local member to the Education Minister this was all taken into consideration, and he was successfully placed in the class. He is in there for the subjects he needs and integrated for the subjects he can manage in mainstream.

We were horrified that the LaST from our school had no idea that numbers were required to in the Domains such as ability to engage with the curriculum, these scores he got 0 on he later scored much higher when they were done correctly, these scores are used to determine the level of support required and a specialist teacher at the school had no idea how to fill out the very important forms for students with a disability in every school. We would expect that this was part of their job and they should be trained in it.

Also of concern to me in 2015 was the LaST and the English teacher had asked the school P&C to fund ten iPad with programs which they did, for use for the low level support students the students accessing ESES, however at the end of the year at roll over the ESES funds at the school was still over $100,000 which the principal said was in the hands of the LaST to spend, these monies are to be used for current students and this actually had me so mad I was crying in the schools finance committee as the P&C representative on this school committee.

In 2016 as attendance had dropped to 50% even in the MC class we applied for assisted transport for him, again unfortunately the LaST did not attach the attendance data so he was assessed as being an independent traveller, when I put in the appeal with the data and the departmental email of the HSLO saying that even at 13 years old (he was too old) he was not on her caseload he was granted access to the assisted transport to help him attend at a better rate.

C.Developments since the 2010 Upper House inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs and the implementation of its recommendations

Sadly many of the recommendations of the 2010 Upper House Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs and implementations of its recommendations have not come to fruition, this may be for many reasons including the change of government at both a state and federal level, the big changes in education such as the removal of $1.8 billion dollars over four years prior to signing up to Gonski on 23rd April 2013, the three Director Generals/Secretaries and the complete overhaul of the Department Under local schools local decisions.

As a parent I have never seen a role of the parent statement in a school or given to parents that I have in my network of special needs parents groups, some parents are not even aware of what an IEP is or how important they are to its goals.

The LaST at my son school does not seem to be aware of how to use the forms required to submit them for additional support, nor does she support the classroom teachers to differentiate the curriculum to make it accessible for the students.

Assisted technology comes and goes, it is promised each year but in mainstream primary it would stay in the old class at the end of the year and we would have to fight to get access again and again for it.

My son has DSMV5 ASD2, ODD, general anxiety, sleep disorder, reading difficulties, sensory processing disorder and a motor skill disorder,(as diagnosed by his paediatrician) yet as autism is his first diagnosis the DGO said that was the only issue they had to consider for funding or support class placement, all of these complexities add to his inability to engage with the curriculum and it took private visits to the paediatrician, PhD trained psychologist, speech therapist and occupational therapist at great expense and also to access his attendance data at school to have him eligible to even go to placement panel and that was after the local member and education Minister Adrian Piccoli stepped in. At each transition point this had needed new letters from dr's at parental expense, I feel like I live at dr appointments just to access services for my kids, I don't want anything more for him than equal access to an education.

A friend of mine has to get her child re-diagnosed every transition point with Down's syndrome. It is insulting and degrading and expensive.

The teams that were recommended to be set up for schools might happen in connected community schools but certainly not in other country schools leaving parents to transport students 100kms to appointments for assessments. A teacher at told me that teaching staff and the AEO at the school sometimes transport students to Dubbo for appointments as parents have no other means of getting the children assessed. These teachers are then not at school for two days and need to be replaced.

When SLSP became ESES the model was cost neutral so students that had been at the higher end of under $6000 funding actually lost funding, it was great that more children were supported however some lost out, although one school in Sydney area kicked up such a fuss it kept its funding above need again making a joke of the idea of equity for students.

With the ESES autism is funded to schools at 1:100 which at the time who was in charge of SLSP said was very generous, it is now known and she was told then that it is actually closer to 1:78 children who have autism.

The mental health quotient of the funding was based on the bottom 10% of NAPLAN however this then adds a dilemma to schools like James Ruse High and other selective stream classes, don't they have students with mental health issues? Or the schools that "suggest" that parents don't send their students to school that week.

And now what happens to students with additional needs and disabilities who can't achieve a band 8 in year9 NAPLAN? I have a letter from Adrian Piccoli stating that if my son does life skills in English he could still get an HSC but what if that isn't what he wants to do? Why not just give up now and take a RoSA and forget the bother of forcing him to school till he is 17 if he can't even achieve an HSC like his sisters?

With increased demand and no bigger bucket of funding schools under LSLD will have to make choices, heat/cool the school, provide sanitary waste or support students learning needs?

The online training for autism was criticized by an academic in the 2010 report, and it was an English course that was meant to take 20 hours of professional learning time, I completed it in four hours, and didn't really find it that useful.

when she attended NSW P&C Federation meeting to tell the peak body about SLSP in 2009 said there would be mandatory 110 hours training which later became non mandatory, given that by 2018 all teachers will have to maintain their accreditation surely this is now the time to make training and upskilling of staff across all schools embedded into their practise.

SLSO's are vital to students with a disability or additional needs however many are casual and find it difficult to access the schools professional learning budget making upskilling for them difficult.

With the National Govt again looking at funding formula the nationally consistent data for students with a disability is still waiting to be properly rolled out.

I have just sat as a P&C rep on a principal panel for SSP it is a year7-10(12) school/program but teachers and the principal and the classification is all primary making access and knowledge of the secondary curriculum difficult.

Recommendation eight of the 2010 report made me weep. It reminded me of the show the games and the 94 metre track for the 100metre race, laughable if it wasn't so serious.

D.Complaint and review mechanisms within the school systems in New South Wales for parents and carers

This is the section that makes me the saddest. Time and time again you hear of parents who are just asking that their child have access to an education like other students and they are bullied, belittled and made to feel unwelcome in their requests.

These parents have often had to struggle to get their student this far and the system makes them jump through more hoops just to get access to the required support, anyone would think the money was coming directly from the federal government entitlements the way it is so hard for some to access.

My son went to school after being at early intervention and had just transition support, he ran away from school in kindy and ran zigzagging across the new England highway while I tried to catch him, the school weren't looking for him out of the grounds it was just that I saw him, I had to ring them to help me catch him before he was hit by a semitrailer. I still have nightmares about it.

He started, at aged 7, medication at the schools request due to his ODD and had to have his medication at lunchtime due to his lack of appetite on the first day I filled in the forms told five staff members and left the medication at school. When he got home he had a meltdown and hit his sister giving her a black eye and a fat lip and screamed in his room for hours, when I called the school in the morning and said neither child would be attending and asked as an aside how the medication went, the answer was oh we didn't see him so we forgot, I believe this particular meltdown could have been avoided if the school had called at the end of the day and let me know that he hadn't had it. He was blamed for not attending the office to get it however his class teacher, his SLSO the office staff and the principal all knew he was meant to have it and he was 7- I would have been better off putting it in his bag really.

In year 4 we asked that he be put forward for Dalwood to help his reading, he had been referred off reading recovery (polite way to say he was going to fail and spoil their data) and had had LAP support since then but reading just has never clicked for him, the school councillor promised twice to get back to me as there was a deadline for application, and we heard nothing, so I wrote to the principal stating how unhappy I was and that wasn't the first time I had felt that had been let down by the school and the administration of the school.

I received a personal attach back from the principal on departmental email which I am sure breached departmental code of conduct stating in part "if we have done such a bad job while we will miss we won't miss you, your constant malcontent (which she explained in brackets for me) your lack of respect, and your bulldozer tactics" Principal feb 2011. She cced this to the SEO2 student service , the SED and the Regional Director .

While we had mediation, she said that most parents would be grateful for the education and that other parents wouldn't question the school about what was right for their child with a disability.

This made being an active parent at the school particularly hard and I gave up being on their P&C and helping in the canteen.

No repercussions ever occurred for her and never even apologised for this incident. She is now the local school network director.

In year 5 again did NAPLAN with a scribe, he came home and said in conversation oh when I got the question wrong moved my hand to help me get the right one, now I have always thought that NAPLAN was a diagnostic tool so I wanted to know how well did not how smart the adult was at doing year 5 NAPLAN. I called the school that afternoon and spoke to the deputy and told her what happened, she said she would look into it. Next day came home and he said don't say anything mum I'm in trouble at school, now I understand that kids make things up and that but he had just told me happily about the test. I got a call from the deputy to say was lying and that it hadn't happened. In year7 I requested no scribe and his results were exactly where they should have been, not artificially inflated like in year5, when I asked Frank Potter about this and then emailed as requested to him my concerns I never had a reply that was in August 2015.

There is a loop where students with support can be removed without any parental right of appeal, in year6 going into year7 who had been on individualised funding support since ESES was introduced had the DGO only look at his primary diagnosis and therefore he scored low on the disability conformation sheet, she sent it to Sydney for “informal advice” which came back that he wasn’t eligible for further individualised support, and couldn’t go to placement panel for them to review, if it goes to placement panel there is an appeal process however if you are ineligible via “informal Advice” then there is no means of appeal at all.

E.Other

My son spent from kindy to year7 in mainstream class, he after a ministerial is a member of an MC class at the high school his sisters all attended and attend. He is able to integrate into mainstream where he can and have the support he needs where he needs it, also if he is having a bad day there is support for him.

I was disappointed however that while our principal was away on long service leave the deputy took the special Ed special appointment teacher off the class and put him in pdhpe faculty, as this was not a promotion and he was a special appointment after doing a masters this disappointed me greatly and disrupted the class.