

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

Name: Name suppressed

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I am the full time carer of my 8 year old son. He has a rare genetic syndrome that presents with a severe cognitive impairment, autism, sensory processing disorder, apraxia, vision processing disorder and a moderate physical impairment.

We decided along with the Department of Education that a School for Specific Purpose (SSP) was the right setting for our child. He does not thrive in a busy big space with no structure or boundaries like a mainstream or support unit provides. An SSP ensures he meets his full potential in an environment that he can cope with. He will most likely never hold a job. Yet, he still has the ability to learn. I wish for him to learn the life skills that an SSP is designed for. That may be counting the number of weet-bix to put in a bowl to make his breakfast and the process it involves. He is not like other children that this comes naturally, it has taken 6 years for him to learn where his cup is kept in the kitchen, how to open the kitchen draw, take it out, turn the tap on, fill the cup and drink. Something we take for granted has taken 6 years, but he got there. He now will not need someone to do that for him later in life. I find very little point in him having to follow a mainstream syllabus. I do however see the need for the teachers to be held accountable in what they teach. Sending my son to school is not considered a baby sitting service.

Until 13 months ago we lived in Sydney and he attended an SSP school. We were very happy with the school. It met his needs, the teachers and support staff were attentive, caring and encouraged him to develop and grow. They saw potential in every student and took their profession seriously. We had every faith in the staff that he would be cared for and thrive in such a positive environment. We were extremely happy with the school.

Our decision to move to rural NSW was not taken lightly. Our sons health was good and our quality of family life was taken as the motivating factor. We chose to leave a great school knowing I would need to supplement aspects of his education, travel further for therapy and appointments and generally be a bigger champion in his education.

Our current SSP is small. It is a country school. The teachers and support staff are caring individuals. We have found the community in general kind and well meaning. Our families quality of life and happiness has definitely improved living in the country with space, animals and a slower pace of life compared to our city environment.

That said, the community pities us for having a child with special needs, we are not empowered to make decisions in our school community. We have found the expectations within our country community, of special needs children are significantly lower than that of the Sydney community. I was told by our principal that the parents at this school have enough to deal with let alone volunteering to help out or joining the P&C. I found volunteering and participating on a P & C an empowerment as well as an avenue to meet other parents. Participating in the P & C encourages parents to make decisions that have a positive influence on their child, to show hope that their child has potential. The funding the school receives for additional activities come from the P & C Bus Business and the generous community donating and fundraising for specific small projects.

Although we are only an hours drive to Sydney, we have felt the teaching staff, led by the principal have isolated themselves and not kept up with progress we have seen in Sydney SSP schools. The teachers have not been receptive to new techniques our therapists have suggested. Rather they consider the therapists an intrusion into their classrooms. We have worked hard with our therapists that are leaders in their field, over many years to gain muscle strength and hand coordination specific to our child so they can participate in classroom and teacher activities. Our therapists suggestions are being ignored.

The resources at our Country SSP are very poor, both in the classroom and in the playground. The classroom resources are very poor. Our Sydney classrooms had "zones" a table at each zone for each child and a chair at each zone for each child. We currently have one table and chair per child with no "zones" for effective learning. I have approached with our school asking where we can resource funding for better equipped classrooms to match what Sydney SSP's have and either the staff are not interested or it is not available. I struggle to understand how one SSP classroom can be three times the size of another, have underfloor heating, therapy equipment, current technology, internal bathroom and the other has none of these. All children should have access to the same classroom equipment. It should not be based on the school size, the teachers lack of knowledge in current teaching and classroom techniques or the principals lack of management. For us we have seen a well laid out classroom, with facilities to limit the teachers and SLSO time away from the classroom have contributed to our sons general behaviour and thereby ability to learn.

My sons classroom does not have a "time out" area. It is not big enough. Children with behavioural issues are escorted outside to an enclosed playground to let off steam. There is no area inside for the children to take a break. There is also no internal toilet. The SLSO has to walk down the corridor to toilet the child. This toilet is old has louvre windows. In a region where it snows this is unacceptable, especially for children who are incontinent and require changing. SSP's in Sydney have internal bathrooms with heated floors for the comfort of students, and they are not even in a snow zone. Why is it that all classrooms in SSP schools have not been updated to modern standards?

Our general impression of the country SSP school is poor. It is poorly resourced and led by a principal who is biding time for retirement. In my experience with SSP schools we have seen the best, led by a principal that has vision and drive, teachers that are passionate and see a child's potential. They were committed to ensuring every child reached their full potential. We have also experienced a school where children are not expected to do anything. Parents are pitied and expected to send their child off to glorified baby sitting. We are not prepared to settle for our child to attend school to bide time. We do not have a choice in our child's schooling in the area we live. The NDIS has in its brief time been a complete success for our family. It has relieved financial pressure and enabled our child to receive necessary therapy to reach his goals.

My hope is that this Committee see Country SSP schools are seriously under resourced. Teaching staff must be brought up to speed with their Sydney counterparts. Staff must engage in inservice days within other SSP schools to ensure best practices are drawn from. Funding must be increased or structure changed to compensate for smaller schools and resources need to be improved for older schools in need of better facilities.

We cannot rid our community of SSP schools. They are not for every child but the best option for so many, run correctly they can offer both long term and immediate benefit for so many children and their families as well as communities.

Thank you for your time in reading our story. I hope that this committee sees our individual stories and implements strategies that will fix problems at the grass roots. Our children have many obstacles to overcome in life. We do not need to battle the Department of Education to get the facilities in their school to best meet their educational needs.

Yours sincerely,