

**Submission
No 40**

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

Name: Name suppressed

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To the Legislative Council for the General Purpose Standing Committee No.3
Inquiry into the Provision of Education to Students with a Disability or Special
Needs in Government and Non-Government Schools in New South Wales

Dear Honourable Members of the Committee,

It is with relish that I respond to your Inquiry, and add my voice on behalf of my daughter and family with our experiences in the NSW Education system, specifically our experiences within the Disability and Special Needs areas, and the utter failing of the Schools themselves, the Department of Education & Training, and System to provide an equitable, or even acceptable semblance of education.

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

It is hard to discern just HOW equitable the access to resources for students with disabilities or special needs are when parents/carers do not have access to the information of *how* the resources are spread between the schools, *how* the schools decide to use those resources, and *how* much is actually allocated towards each student, class, or school.

The lack of easily accessible information with the whole process leaves parents/carers & assisting non-government/school professionals and therapists in the dark, and at the behest of the schools, and disability staff of the education department itself.

If the school & disability staff, particularly, Student Learning & Well-being Advisors are open to including parents/carers in the application, and allocation of resources from this funding, then one can only assume that the disabled or special need student(s) educational outcomes and opportunities increase.

However, this has not been our experience in either of the two school situations that we have placed our daughter in, and there has been zero information provided to us by either school or disability education staff on the application process, how much the school has to work with, how much each student receives, and how this is decided.

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 schools

I am basing my response to this question on the information provided on the Department of Education NSW website, under the Areas of Activity:

1. Professional learning for skilled and knowledgeable teachers

Again, the exact information is not easily accessible to parents/carers/interested professionals; after digging around for some time on the DET NSW website, I finally came across a page that had a Teacher only portal to access the training modules that I assumed was the 'professional learning for skilled and knowledgeable teachers'.

Even after having our daughter's case reviewed by the District Officer, and questioning just which modules were available to teaching/school staff in relation to assisting her ASD, PTSD, Sensory &

Auditory Processing, OCD, anxiety & social anxiety, etc, we were still only given verbal information that there are 2 online training modules for ASD that are available to all staff, although not compulsory, and a further 2 online training modules that School Principals and DET staff 'can encourage' staff to access.

There is no accessible information to parents/carers/professionals as to what information about ASD that is contained within these learning modules, nor which staff have undertaken this 'training', nor whether the information being provided to staff is accurate in content, nor whether it is being utilised effectively, or accurately in the school or classroom situations.

It is in our experience, with both schools in South Australia, and more recently New South Wales, that most teachers and school staff have NOT completed these supposedly basic ASD online training modules, and have most certainly NOT completed the extra 2 modules under instruction or compulsion from School Principals or DET staff.

The fact that DET staff cannot force School Principals or staff to take these modules when problems arise in school & class settings is of concern in itself; there is no accountability for teachers, staff, or Principals if they refuse or omit to take this 'extra training', or in how they apply it, or in ensuring that it actually relevant or accurate in assisting to meet children(s)' needs – other than a warning that if they continue to ignore the advice and instruction of supervisors/DET staff that they can be sued by parents/carers directly without any assistance from the Education System. This is of negligible concern, I am sure.

It is also in our experience that most schools, teachers, or staff do NOT undertake any specific DET online, or outside professional training or development until a student with specific needs is enrolled in the school with extra requirements that force a situation of extra training being undertaken, or of the school/staff/teachers ignoring those needs purposefully, and eventually pushing the parents/carers to remove the child from that situation, and sometimes taking legal action to ensure that their child's needs are met.

We, as parents, carers, and concerned community members find this to be a vast failing on the part of the Schools, Teachers & staff members in a professional sense, and on a larger scale, the Department of Education & Training.

2. Support for Students with disability in regular classrooms

Once more, it has been in our experience, in 2 different school settings in NSW (and previous settings in South Australia) that parents/carers do not have Information about what support may be available to their child(ren) in regular classrooms, do not have actual input or say as to what support IS provided in those settings, and if they wish to have a greater input then it is often an uphill battle often involving a shady complaints process, calling in Advocates and supportive professionals, and moving further up the DET ladder to try (which is also very short on details as to who holds which position, with contact details, and there is no organisational structure chart available with names/positions) and gain some sort of effective support for their child(ren).

This process is often done completely blindly, because there is little or no information provided to parents/carers/professionals, and very little working information on DET websites, besides a brief up-beat description of how an Individualised Education Plan, and/or Classroom Support will assist your child.

We have received feedback that there are some Schools that do cater effectively and openly towards parents/carers/professionals meeting child(ren)'s needs, negotiating as needed, and helping as much as necessary to ensure that support, and other needs are met. Those instances

are few and far between, however, and only 1 school in our daughter's 8 years of schooling thus far has even attempted to assist her, with our close input, in the true sense that this Area of Activity implies.

The process of IEP's (Individualised Education Plan) is also fraught with limited information on the School/Teacher/Staff's behalf, if it is actually shown to the parents/carers at all – there may be one on school records, but a copy, or signed copy is not handed over.

It has been our experience that we have been given 'lip service' towards our daughter's IEP meetings & content, the strategies that are in place, and the information that they base these strategies upon are most often NOT communicated to the parent/carer here in NSW.

This is not acceptable.

How then, is the Support for Students with Disability in regular classrooms effectively given, without an open and freely negotiated system in place, for parents/carers to feel reassured that their child(ren)'s needs are being met properly, or at all?

3. Special Schools as centres of expertise

Quite frankly, we laugh at this statement/Area of Activity.

After having a disasterous enrolment in a mainstream Central School, where our daughter's needs were not only *not* met, but actively ignored, and she was beaten up by a group of students, we grudgingly moved her to the closest Special Needs School in the hope that the School, Teachers & Staff would be better equipped, trained, and knowledgeable in the areas of special needs, disability, ASD and meeting her complex needs – despite our concerns about the nature of the setting itself, and our daughter's ability to cope with the complexities contained therein.

Not only were the Teacher(s) & staff under-trained in meeting student's specific needs, they were also unwilling to train, or re-train to meet differing needs, unwilling to employ strategies & assistance offered to them by the professional support we access for our daughter, and employed a one size fits all approach to try and somehow make it through the 5 days a week of little more than baby-sitting, or a Day Options program approach that is utilised for adults with disabilities later on in life.

That is not to say that some Teachers & staff did not try their utmost to do the best that they could to try and meet their student's needs, however, there was little or no 'education' achievement or outcomes being met in that chaotic, under resourced, inappropriate environment.

And to quote the District Officer directly: "It is the most difficult school setting that she manages in the whole of her regional area."

The effective outcome for students exiting from Special Schools is lowered educational outcomes, leading to lowered employment opportunities, and negatively impacted life-skills outcomes in adulthood.

This is our experience in speaking with other parents/carers of children, and also in working with adults who have come out of Special School environments and now find themselves ill-prepared, under-educated, and with little opportunity due to the lack of skills development in those school setups.

These Special Needs schools also foster social exclusion from mainstream students & communities that continues throughout the person's life, along with lowered expectations of abilities, educational outcomes, employment opportunities, and community inclusion.

We also experienced these difficulties in Mainstream Schools that have Special Support

Classes/Units, with the added safety issues of bullying & exclusion from the mainstream population of the school, which is ineffectively managed by the Teachers/Staff/DET policies, guidelines & actions, and ultimately further isolates these students, in order to provide a safer environment, while they are baby-sat through 12 years of school.

4. Understanding and assessing the learning and support needs

This area is once again, very dependent on the good faith of the School/Principal/Teachers/Staff. Our experiences in NSW Schools in this area have not been favourable at all, with Principals, Deputy Principals, Teachers & Staff actively undermining & blocking attempts at DET, and outside professional learning & assessment tests and reviews, ignoring existing professional reports, assessments, strategies and advice, and refusing funding and DET/External training, assistance, advice & strategies in all areas of this Area of Activity.

The Learning & Student Well-being Officer, who is supposed to be the first port of call for any complaints and/or student well-being difficulties, was unhelpful and complicit in avoiding the Duty of Care with both schools that we had our daughter enrolled at.

Understanding, in our experience, is limited to the DET online training manuals, and further limited by the culture within the education department, and schools/staff themselves. There is an educational system *arrogance* that says that they know best, because they are the educators, and have the experience and training to best assess and implement the learning and support needs of students.

That may be so with neurologically typical students, but it is NOT the case with students who are neurologically diverse.

The line that is trotted out, across all levels by DET & School staff is that 'the parents/carers are the experts on their child(ren), and best know how to meet their needs', however, the actual practice/attitude/arrogant stance is that they know nothing and everything that is imparted from a parent/carer is completely ignored and overridden.

This is an area that both DET & Schools/Staff completely and utterly fail in, for the most part.

5. Access to information and expert support

There IS access to information and expert support, in all areas of Disability and Special Needs Services.

Both within the Department of Education & Training, and also from external sources, such as Foundations & Support groups relevant to the particular disability that a student has, individual Professionals and Therapists involved in the student's care outside of school, limitless information on the internet including the most current and up-to-date research and development, and regular information and training sessions held by all of the above resources.

Along with parents/carers, who are supposed to be 'the experts in their child(ren)'s life'.

It is whether the School/Teacher/Staff take the opportunities up, organise time with their supervisors to undertake the training, and organise the necessary funding if there is a cost involved.

In our experience, to reiterate a previous statement; only 1 Teacher/School undertook voluntary extra internal and external training to better learn, understand, and assist our daughter in the areas of difficulty that she was experiencing at the time. That Teacher was not in NSW.

This too is completely unacceptable.

Further, our daughter's current Psychologist has attended information and training sessions held by ASPECT, and other Foundations/Support groups, with minimal costs, and held in easily accessible locations, and reports that not 1 Principal, Teacher or Student Learning Support Officer was in attendance from the Public (primary), High, or Central Schools in the District.

At one seminar, a single School Counsellor attended.

The local Autism Support Group coordinator, who is also the parent of an ASD child himself, has also been heavily involved for many years in supporting local families, carers and children, and also offers his expertise to schools in the District through information, service linking, and talks/seminars. He reports that many professionals who have an ASD child or a child with a disability/special needs themselves whom he asks to be guest speakers will specifically request that the School/Teachers/Staff NOT be made aware of this, because it immediately biases their view of their expertise and professionalism.

The superiority complex that Schools/Teachers/Staff have towards the information, knowledge, and experience base of parents/carers is detrimental to both the educational delivery and outcomes for students and families, and needs to be addressed. Along with the complete and purposeful turning aside of information, strategies, recommendations, and therapies that are written up in professional assessments and reports.

In both school enrolments in NSW we offered previous assessments and reports, only to be told that Teachers/Staff had all of the relevant information already. Then as time moved on, and our daughter's needs were not being met, we would invariably mention the assessment & report strategies & recommendations to be told, or realise that they had not in fact been accessed, read, or referred to at all.

How are students with Disability and Special Needs going to be properly supported, and educated if the Teachers/Staff themselves do not/will not educate themselves in their specific needs?

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

Based on the overwhelming and regular feedback that we have heard since moving to NSW from other parents/carers, Teachers/Principals/Staff, Disability Sector Professionals, and independent professionals and therapists, the implementation of the recommendations from the 2010 Upper House Inquiry have not been completely successful in the areas of increased/sufficient funding, adequate support and training for Schools/Teachers/Staff through DET or external sources, nor have students with disabilities or special needs had their educational outcomes substantively improved.

d) Complaint and review mechanisms within the school systems in New South Wales for parents and carers

In our experience, and in accessing assistance from DIAS/BINC Advocacy services once again, there is no clear complaint or review mechanism within the NSW school system for parents or carers.

After our daughter was seriously assaulted by as many as 10 students at her local central school one morning before school, on school grounds, she was ignored by the Principal, and later

disciplined by her class Teacher after having attempted to tell her of the incident, being overridden, which then resulted in a meltdown.

After the full details of her assault became clear, her Teacher retracted her previous verbal statement to my husband, and all evidence of the matter disappeared – an incident report was not even filled out. It took over 6 months to gain the attention of the District Officer, and only after contacting DIAS/BINC, and threatening legal action were our complaints heard, and a proper investigation was conducted.

We have still not heard of the results of that investigation from the District Officer, nor has an apology been issued by the department, school, or students involved – who incidentally continue to take every opportunity to harass and bully our daughter if she is out in the community without a reliable adult presence.

e) Any other related matters

Obviously in our opinion, the NSW DET still falls seriously short in ensuring that the needs of students with a disability or special needs are met adequately across all areas of the focus of this Inquiry.

We, as parents/carers and concerned community members for other families and children with diverse learning needs, call on the Honourable members of the Inquiry to make a strong statement to the NSW and Federal Governments, the State and Federal Ministers for Education, and push for the broad changes that have been recommended in previous Inquiry findings, and will hopefully, although unfortunately be recommended again in this one.

In our words to the District Officer, upon closing of the meeting with her in regards to our daughter's assault, and in summary of our submission to this Inquiry; "The education system brutalises children with disabilities and special needs, and does not meet their educational, emotional or physical safety, or well-being needs. It is our job as parents to ensure that this does not continue for our daughter and for other children as well."