

**Submission
No 118**

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

Organisation: Clarke Road School P&C Association

Date received: 22 February 2017

Re: Submissions to the inquiry into education of students with a disability or special needs in schools in NSW.

The following submissions are from representatives of Clarke Road School P&C Association who are parents of children with special needs. These parents have also worked as teachers within schools in NSW, bringing an added perspective.

Between these 2 submissions the importance of Schools for Specific Purposes for students with special needs and the lack of access to them is addressed, along with student potential, effective resourcing of Schools for Specific Purposes in NSW and teacher training.

We thank you for your attention to these matters.

Submission 1

I would like to address the access to schools for specific purposes and the provision of special education within mainstream public schools.

I was a secondary teacher passionate about all children finding the thrill and challenge of learning and self-perpetuating achievement. Enabling them to reach positively into their futures to expand their vision of themselves sees hope and excitement grow, regardless of abilities and backgrounds.

Now I am the busy mum of 3 boys, the eldest of which has Down Syndrome. He attends our local school for specific purposes.

In making the decision about his placement for schooling there was much pressure from disability-specific groups to have him attend our local primary school, as do his brothers. Inclusion is to be highly valued and protected, and is not just a social expectation but incorporates amongst much other equal access to expanding horizons and empowered achievement. In my experience from both sides of the fence, too often the mainstream placements prioritise teaching conformity to social norms and keeping students occupied rather than giving them wings with which to fly.

The reason for this I believe comes down to lack of training and a lack of resources, especially in time. The world of special needs is extremely broad, complex, and incorporates many distinct subsets of knowledge. The reality of the amount of hours it would take to adequately train a current teacher via normal inservicing models would make it an exercise years long. There is still a persisting belief amongst educators I meet that a student with an intellectual disability requires the same processes of teaching as a typically developing child, just at a slower pace. Teachers specifically trained in special education teach differently. From preparation with the child so that their brains are in a state ready to take in new information, a large variety of strategies to impart that knowledge, through to their ability to refine priorities from the curriculum for each student, I have learnt an increasing respect for their speciality.

Whilst inclusion into mainstream schools must be maintained, equitable access to resources requires much improved training for the teachers involved so that students with special needs also have access to the thrill of learning and true achievement in a school setting.

Gaining a placement in a school for specific purposes has been a gruelling experience for many families I have met. Naively I had expected personally that once my son's eligibility was established, like any other public school, he would be assured a placement in his local special needs schools. Instead it was a case of who could plead their needs the loudest in order to gain an available spot. All professionals involved with my son were definite in his need of specialist schooling, but to gain the placement once we were informed we were unlikely to get one for him I spent hours visiting all other possible placements and documenting the unviability of his schooling life there. His local school for specific purposes was the best fit for him, and eventually we were granted a placement there for him. I know families who were excluded. The experience of dealing with the placement panels has left a sour taste in many families' mouths, whether they received a placement or not. You do not expect to have to fight for equitable access to education even within disability circles.

The reality is, the higher the needs of the child, the less time parents have to fight these battles to advocate for them.

Schools for Specific Purposes (SSPs) are a hub of truly expert knowledge backed up by combined years of experience. Excellent SSPs are not a segregated institution but rather a base from which students are effectively enabled and empowered to interact with the world in ever-widening circles. They have open doors to bring in other schools and representatives from many walks of life, and to send out their students to experience and learn, and all of this as the students are equipped and able.

I am grateful to have a placement for my son at an excellent SSP. If a child is eligible for placement, one should be easily available. It is an expectation of parents of typically developing children to very easily place their child into a local school knowing they are experts in typically developing children and capable of giving them wings with which to fly, it should also be able to be the expectation of families involved with special needs, and this requires more access to schools for specific purposes.

If useful I would be happy to discuss anything further.

Yours faithfully,
Kati Herrington

Submission 2

I am a teacher and have worked for 10 years in a school for children with autism. I have also had some experience in a local school for specific purposes. My son has autism and attends Clarke Road School in Hornsby.

All children have the potential to learn but students with a disability or special needs often miss out on vital learning opportunities for a variety of reasons. In this submission I have listed key problems faced in this sector and possible solutions:

- a) Staff to student ratio is often not high enough. Studies show some students require 1:1 to learn new skills and others work better in small groups of two or three students.

- b) There are marked differences in student abilities within a classroom. Example: In a class of 8 students there were students at similar ages and levels of basic daily living skills but one student had exceptional mathematic skills, another had difficulty telling the time and another student who could not recognise numbers. In this classroom, the ratio of one teacher and one learning support officer was not adequate to promote a successful learning environment.
- c) Often teachers are teaching concepts that are in the curriculum but far too complex for their students to grasp. The concept of Ancient Egypt or Ludwig Von Leichhardt is beyond the understanding of students who do not have the concept of months, years or Egypt. These examples show a lack of experience and training to accurately assess student language and comprehension levels.
- d) Teachers do not receive the level of support required to meet the complex educational, communication, social and behavioural needs of a child with a disability or special needs. For example, I have witnessed the staffing of another classroom where there was one teacher and one learning support officer to address the needs of 6 severely disabled primary children (four in wheel chairs, one with behaviour issues and one that needed to be tube fed). The majority of the day was spent toileting and feeding the students. The students received very few educational opportunities and spent a lot of the time waiting around. This was the regular staffing level for this class and from my observation the staff were overstretched.
- e) All the teachers I have met in special education have had their students' best interests as a priority but conditions such as autism are still often misunderstood and not catered for. The complex needs of students with autism and the lack of substantial training in this area can lead to a misunderstanding of the student. As a result, supports are not put in place and the student develops undesirable behaviour. One example is of a sound-sensitive student who normally enjoys music. The student did not want to go to music class. Music was held in a concrete room and was very loud. In that instance, despite a number of students having difficulty with the noise, the program was not varied to cater for this group of students. Instead, the students were given earmuffs and participated outside the room. This example shows a lack of understanding of sound sensitivity and a lack of flexibility in programing. A program that took into account the sound sensitivity of some of the students in the group would include a different room if possible and some softer pieces of music so that these students could benefit.

These problems can be solved by:

- Increasing the staff to student ratio in classrooms with students with a disability or special needs. It would be beneficial for both students and teaching staff to have learning opportunities in smaller groups or 1:1 for periods in the day for the students that require it.
- A speech pathologist, behaviour specialist and occupational therapist should be attached to schools to address specific student needs. This would ensure best practice and solve the problem schools face with the roll out of the NDIS. (Parents

are now able to engage their own allied health workers and therefore schools have the added difficulty of potentially having to deal an unmanageable number of outside providers.)

- The above health professionals write an individualised program to address student needs and provide supports where necessary. Dedicated teachers employed to work specifically on individual programs with students for example to practice speech exercises and activities, or to train a student to use an augmentative communication device within the class setting. This would give students the added support and attention they need to learn.
- Teachers need the training to identify the language levels (receptive and expressive language) of their students so that they can teach to those levels. The principal at Clarke Road School saw the need for this approach and managed to fund a program through outside sources. This is best practice in schools in other countries and should be an integral part of special needs training.
- Further training and support for teachers working with students with complex conditions such as autism will ensure best practice and positive outcomes. Teachers in special needs should have adequate training in autism, sensory sensitivities, behaviour management and the use of visual supports. This would help to provide a better learning environment for this group of students and for many others that have similar difficulties.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this process.

Kathleen Cahill