

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

**Name:** Mrs Meaghan Sweeney (PC)

**Date received:** 24 February 2017

---

Partially  
Confidential

Meaghan L Sweeney

General Purpose Standing Committee Number 3

**RE: Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs in government and non-government schools in New South Wales**

To whom it may concern,

I make this submission as the parent of a 25 year old woman with Down Syndrome who attended regular class in the NSW State system for her whole education to HSC level. My daughter Joscelyn now lives independently in the community, has a part time job, volunteers looking after babies at a local crèche, gets around our town on her pushbike and is very well known and loved. She is a well adjusted, social and competent citizen within her intellectual capacity. I maintain that her education in the regular class has a lot to do with her adult success. Being educated with her peers in the regular class gave her the same experiences, curriculum, expectations and motivations to grow and develop.

We had a very difficult time ensuring her placement in regular class in the mid 1990s. In fact she was the first student with Down Syndrome to be enrolled in regular class in our town of Wagga Wagga at the time. We faced much pressure to place her at the special school or support units that were coming into fashion at the time. This pressure continued her whole schooling life to some degree.

In 2010 upon seeking enrollment in regular class for year 11 at  
after my husband, a police sergeant, was transferred, the principal declared 'not in my school' and angrily showed us the door. As we were veterans of this sort of attitude we simply enrolled her anyway and got on with her education as best we could.

It is with great disappointment that I witness the same discrimination and lack of access to the regular class for students with disability that our family experienced.

I would like to comment on 3 of the terms of reference of your enquiry.

**Equitable Access**

As our daughter has a known profile in our community many local families seek my support and advice in relation to educational issues. Their stories are often similar. Initially they experience a school principal's outright rejection of their child's enrollment in the regular class. Most principals cite lack of resources, lack of teacher training, and poor community attitudes as the reason for not accepting

the enrollment. Enormous pressure is then placed on the family to accept an enrollment in a support unit or they are directed to special schools.

If families pursue enrollment the student with disability often faces a hostile environment. Some examples I have witnessed include:

- little/no adjustment being made for the students educational needs,
- teachers and teacher aides publicly questioning the student placement,
- refusal to support the student's social interactions at recess and lunchtime,
- not allowing students to participate in excursions
- not allowing students to participate in some subjects.

All of these actions appear to happen to force the family to withdraw their child or accept a placement in a segregated classroom.

### **Complaints and reviews**

Although there is a complaints process within the education system many families are reluctant to use it. Most families would like a good working relationship with their child's school and fear that making a formal complaint will add heat to an already volatile situation. Their greatest fear is that the school will take out any vengeance on their vulnerable child or any brothers and sisters that attend the school.

If a review occurs it is usually focused, once again, on the suitability of the student's placement in regular class. Rarely is there a review of the resources/teaching methods/adjustments that have been made to support the student in order to make the placement successful.

If complaints and reviews were to be effective and protect vulnerable students in the process it would be more successfully delivered by an independent agency.

### **Other issues of note**

In the 1970s and 80s there was a term called 'mainstream dumping' in which student with disabilities were placed in regular classrooms without any adjustment or support, with very damaging outcomes for the students. Since the 1990s many advances have been made in relation to inclusive education practice and resource allocation to support such.

When our daughter commenced school in the 90s we needed to look to Canada, the UK and the US for examples of inclusive educational practice, however we now have a wealth of examples and learning available in Australia to support teachers and schools to include students with disability in regular class. We now have decades of educational best practice to draw from in relation to inclusive education. If recourses are available through learning support and teacher education is available why are principals and teachers still so hostile to the enrolment of students with disability in regular class?

Apart from overt discrimination I believe the existence of a parallel, segregated educational system is an issue that needs to be addressed. There has been a huge rise in the number of support units in NSW, indeed it is difficult to find a school

now that doesn't have one or more segregated classes on campus. This exacerbates the reluctance of principals and teachers to make adjustments necessary to include a student with disability in regular class. We have experienced significant change in the adult world with the roll out of the NDIS. The foundation is now there to increase the social and economic participation of people with disability in the community with people in control of their own funding. We are witnessing adults escaping segregated services and social isolation to become full citizens. Surely our education system should be preparing all our students - those with and without disabilities - for this inclusive future.

International educational best practice, discrimination and human rights law all point to the regular class as the best education for students with disability with no ill effects on typical students.

Until there is only one system of education for all students continued discrimination is bound to occur.

Please feel free to contact me if you require any further information or clarification.

Kind regards

Meaghan L Sweeney