

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

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Submission for NSW government inquiry into children with disability and special needs in NSW schools

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This is a partial record of the experience of a family at the local public primary school

I was saddened and surprised by their experience; that this was the institutional response to a special needs child in this day and age. I would have thought there was a requirement that the school use whatever resources they already had, and those they could draw on through government and NGO services, to work with the family and the child to try to create the social and learning environment he needed at the school where he was enrolled.

This intelligent and personable boy (with some challenging behaviour too), is no longer in the school community, he does not get to draw on the benefits of attending his closest primary school (local friends, being known by a larger number of local parents and neighbours, attending school with his older sibling), and his parents have been through a highly stressful and discouraging experience, adding to the stresses associated with raising an autistic child.

Like two-thirds of the children at the school he was an 'out of area' enrolment (geographically it is the closest school for many children), and perhaps this influenced the mindset of the school. The parents certainly felt that there was a great deal of tokenism present and that the underlying message being sent was that the school would not be making any particular effort for their son. Their son started school in Kindergarten in 2014 and was diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum, with Aspergers, during that year. His parents removed him from the school at the end of 2014.

He started at another public primary school at the beginning of 2015. It has not been easy but the school principal and class teacher at this other school were committed to the child and the parents and worked to find a path for this child to social and educational engagement. This year he is a year 3 student in a composite year 4/5/6 class where he is able to do work at a year 4 level; he has found this very absorbing. It is not easy for this family, for the child, for the parents; or for the school, or for the class teacher; it is clear that it requires love, patience and creativity from all to negotiate a system, and a world, designed for the majority. There is no perfect answer or finite point where everything has been worked out for the school or child, but at this second school the effort was, and is, made to seek solutions. I wonder why the first school did not take the same approach?

Following are some of the events that occurred over the family's time at the school:

After their son's diagnosis the parents found it very difficult to book a meeting with the principal; they had to wait some time before a meeting time was found and twice meetings were cancelled at short notice; this was difficult for the parents as they both work full time and needed to plan ahead to take time off for meetings. It added to what was a very stressful time for them as they dealt with the diagnosis of their son and the steep learning curve of understanding what the diagnosis meant. They could see the immediate need to design a program at home and school to support him in the best way they could and the lack of communication from the school was distressing.

After some weeks, in concert with the school principal, school counsellor, class teacher and their child's psychologist a plan was designed to assist their son to make the most of the school environment.

One aspect of this plan related to communication between the class teacher and the parents. Each day the teacher was to write a note in a book to let the parents know about their son's day. This was done for a period of time but then just stopped with no explanation.

Another part of the plan was designed to assist their son to manage his own behaviour in class. The family's psychologist had suggested that some small rewards be used by the teacher to reinforce good behaviour. His mother bought a series of Pokemon cards (collector cards for children), and gave them to the teacher to hand out as she saw fit. The teacher used them at first but then the mother realised that they were no longer being handed out; she asked the teacher about what had happened and the teacher replied abruptly that she wasn't going to do it anymore and that 'he can't be treated as special, he needs to be treated the same as everyone else'.

On sports day their son missed out on taking part in his race. His grandmother was there and was very surprised he hadn't run as he had been looking forward to it. She went up to the teacher in charge of his House group and asked where he was. The teacher said that when she'd told the children to stand up and go to the start area that he hadn't, that he had been lying down on his front on the grass and hadn't got up, so he'd missed out. The grandmother was very upset at this and explained that this was simply her grandson self-soothing in what to him was a daunting situation; that the shouting, activity, new location (first visit to local sports field) and new people (House group as opposed to class group), were all stresses to him and that he was managing them by lying on his front on the ground. The House group teacher then organised another impromptu race so that this child got to be part of the day. Lack of knowledge about autism meant that this teacher interpreted 'coping' behaviour as naughtiness.

The decision to change schools was made when the severe impact on his mental state due to the way he was being treated at the school became clear. He missed a lot of school towards the end of the year and started talking a lot about death and dying, "what's wrong with me", "why am I not like the other kids". He was extremely anxious about attending school and would need to perform calming rituals on the way there.

It became clear to the parents over the year that he attended the school that the school was uninterested in working with them and their psychologist to keep their son at the school. At their final meeting with the principal they were told that once he had left he would not be able to come back if things did not work out at the new school.

At some point in 2014 I rang the Education Department to find out if resources were available to a school and parents in this situation.

The Department's area coordinator said that it is up to the school principal as to whether they draw on the help available for disabled/special needs children in their school. He said that in relation to autism there was training available for teachers; training that teaches them about autism and gives them strategies to use in the classroom to address behaviour that does not fit within the usual range. A non-government autism awareness group said that there are services that will come into the school to work with the teacher and who can design a physical space within the classroom where the child can learn or retreat if they need time out.

When I asked the Education Department's area coordinator how the school could be encouraged to access these resources he said that as it was up to each principal there was nothing the Department could do and that 'you can lead a horse to water...'

I would not have thought that this situation was accepted by the Education Department. I would

have thought there would be some requirement under anti-discrimination laws, or some 'right' that a child had to being educated and supported by their school. The school has over 600 students, two part time support teachers and a school counsellor (two or three days a week), teaching hours are set aside so that extension programs can be designed and delivered. I do not know the intricacies of school management but I would assume that the larger the school the greater the resources, both financial and human, that the school can employ for its students.

As I understand it there is a growing number of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder; these children will want an education and social world; preferably, I would have thought, a local one. As a large, well-resourced, school I think it has a duty to provide whatever help is available for children who are going to find life more complicated than most.

I wonder whether the small catchment of the school (only one third are 'in area' children), has resulted in a student body skewed away from diversity? Have the special needs children been selected out? If they were, would it mean that the principal and teachers have not had to learn to manage a diverse range of needs among the children? They would possibly not see the reason for, or value of, learning a new range of skills.

The school must have many very good, and I'm sure compassionate, teachers; it is well resourced, and has a good reputation. Able-bodied children, who have no special needs, have a happy and thorough education there. I am sure that the school could develop a sound approach to families and children living with special needs/disability. I do not know why the principal responded in this way, I don't imagine it was out of ill will, is it possible that expectations of equity have not filtered through to some of our public schools? Is there too much freedom in the public school system if principals have the choice to either enable or withhold support for special needs children?

Any claims by parents or the school of 'excellence' and 'school community' ring hollow when these ideals are only accessible to some and are only considered relevant to certain children. I am very concerned that the next family to come to the school with a similarly affected child will also go through the experience described above. I would like to think that no other family will go through that. It was simply unfair.

Thank you for holding the inquiry and considering these points.