

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

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

General Purpose Standing Committee Number 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

Our child attends a public secondary school in regional NSW. I will concentrate on our experience with secondary schooling, given its currency and because there is a perception among educators that high school is somehow “harder” than primary school. This is wholly an institutional construct, one designed I believe with student management at the forefront of school administrators’ minds rather than student welfare.

We have always strived for authentic inclusion for our child. We base this on the fact that all research in this area convincingly concludes that inclusive education produces better educational and social outcomes not only for students with a disability but also for their peers who do not have a disability.

We want a typical and meaningful life for our child. Segregated educational settings set people up on a parallel life path of segregation and special programs and subconsciously instils in children without a disability an attitude that disability means difference and is the province of specialist adult intervention.

The education system should be fostering values of acceptance and celebration of human diversity. Inclusive education is fundamental to a typical childhood and by its nature is embedded with ordinary experiences and expectations. With tailored and reflective support in place, it means our child can be just one of the kids.

Equitable Access:

When enrolling our child in the mainstream at the local high school, we were met immediately with resistance from the school’s principal, who was blunt in his opinion that a segregated support class (of which the school boasted many) was the best option, and explained the negative impact it would have on the other students and the increased workload on teachers if the mainstream option is pursued. Our child was not welcomed but instead framed as a burden. There was strong pressure to enrol in the support unit.

We were reassured that children in the support unit are still invited along to extracurricular activities such as school excursions. In other words, it was inclusion on the school’s terms, when it was easiest, which is not inclusion at all. We were reassured that children in the support unit are free to wander the playground at lunchtimes and interact with their non-disabled peers. But I’m left to wonder how many actually do, when starting from a position of separation, trying to surmount subliminal barriers of difference.

A school’s culture is framed largely by its principal. This principal champions support units and therefore segregation. So it’s no surprise that many teachers questioned our child’s presence in the mainstream and questioned our judgment as parents. It was rare for a child with the level of support needs that our child has to be enrolled in the mainstream.

The practice of funnelling children with a disability into segregated, “special” settings is so pervasive that inclusion is seen as exceptional, and parents who pursue inclusion are derided as ideologues.

‘Every Student Every School’ policy:

Inclusion does not work without adequate funding for tailored supports and professional learning. All too often, inclusion is seen to not work, when in actual fact the funding required to allow it to succeed has been absent. This has the perverse effect of reinforcing the false notion that the needs of children with a disability are best met in a segregated setting, when segregated support units and special schools are more expensive to operate than tailored support within inclusive settings.

The issue here is structural. Inclusion fails when it is not adequately resourced, but too often the failure is placed on the child, that failure is innate to the disability and best addressed, somehow, in a congregated setting of other ‘failed’ children.

This has actually been articulated by a teacher’s aide that works with our child, who openly discussed her belief (not with us, but to other members of our family) that our child would be better off in the support unit. This is one of the people who play a crucial role in successful inclusion in a mainstream setting. When we complained about this to the school, we were told that her opinion must stem from her deep concern for our child (the implication being that in our pursuit of inclusive education we lack concern).

We’ve had another aide pull a stupid look when complaining that our child could not remember a password. We’ve even had our child’s participation in a subject (in this case, LOTE) questioned, because there was a view that it would be a waste of time, that our child would not learn anything anyway.

Not only does this all speak to a lack of training, it is illustrative of the broadly held discriminatory attitudes and low expectations that are so pervasive in the education system.

At my child’s school there is a learning support unit tasked with providing support to all students within the mainstream who might need it. They try their best but they are underfunded and therefore their resources are stretched. We have been told that there is not enough funding to cover social support for our child during recesses and lunchtimes, to enable full participation. Each year, our child’s funding amount is initially well below what is adequate, and each year the school has to appeal.

Some teachers endeavour to make adjustments to lessons so that our child can be included and engaged with his peers. But many prefer to pass the responsibility onto the aide and concentrate on the other students.

Inclusive education is crucial when it comes to better educational and social outcomes for children both with and without a disability, as well as for the intergenerational change that

will progressively bring about a more inclusive society that embraces the true breadth of human diversity.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Yours sincerely,