

**Submission
No 195**

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

Organisation: Smithfield Public School

Date received: 26 February 2017

NSW PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY EXAMINING THE
PROVISION OF EDUCATION TO STUDENTS WITH A
DISABILITY OR SPECIAL NEED



ORGANISATION: SMITHFIELD PUBLIC SCHOOL
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DATE: 24TH OF FEBRUARY 2017

SCHOOL CONTEXT

Smithfield Public School is in the Fairfield School Area of the Sydney South West Region. There are 630 students enrolled P-6. This includes a preschool, an Opportunity Class and a support unit which caters for students with a disability. Smithfield Public School also hosts a satellite class from ASPECT, the governing body for people with Autism.

Students come from a diverse range of language backgrounds approximating 85% of the student population. Of these students, 91% have English as another language or dialect, 66 students are refugees with 40 arriving in the last 12 months. The refugees are largely Arabic speakers from Iraq and Syria. Over 30 languages are represented in the school community, with Vietnamese, Arabic and Chinese being the largest groups. Over the last two years there have been slight increases in Khmer, Assyrian, Tongan and Samoan speaking students.

In 2016 the Support unit expanded with the addition of 3 classes. In total Smithfield Public School has 7 support classes catering for 73 students with varying disabilities. This includes a double early intervention unit which caters for students between the ages of 3-6 years old with multiple and varying intellectual disabilities ranging from mild to severe, paired with Autism, down syndrome, multiple Sclerosis and various other additional needs. The early intervention has enrolled 37 preschool age students with a maximum of 8 students in each class. To access this service families, need to apply via there local school, who completes an access request application. Families also need a diagnosis from a pediatrician to apply for this service.

There are 3 Autism classes for students with Autism and a moderate intellectual disability. Students range in age from kindergarten to year 6, there is a maximum of 8 students in these classes. There are also 2 Autism classes for students with Autism who may have a mild intellectual disability to average intelligence and maximum number of 7 students per class.

Parents are from a diverse range of educational backgrounds. 42% have not completed secondary school while 27% have completed tertiary education. The parents' current employment is often not aligned with their educational background. 34% are not employed, 45% are in skilled and unskilled employment and a small group, 6%, is employed in senior management positions.

Please note the following:

Support class numbers and types

Student numbers in support classes are fixed as follows:-	
Mild Intellectual Disability (IM)	18
Moderate Intellectual Disability (IO)	10
Severe Intellectual Disability (S)	6
Emotionally Disturbed (ED)	6
Conduct/Behaviourally Disordered (BD)	6
Multicategorical (MC)	10
Autism / Moderate Intellectual Disability (Au/IO)	8
Autism (Au)	7

IQ Scores

Please note the following:

An average person has an IQ score in the 90 – 110 range.

- A child/person in the **IM** category has an IQ score **less than 75** (lowest 4% population).
- A child/person in the **IO** category has an IQ score **less than 55** (lowest 0.1% population).
- A child/person in the **S** category has an IQ score **less than 40** (less than 0.1% population).

SURVEY

Commencing Wednesday, 11th February, 2017 73 parents from the support unit at Smithfield Public School received the following survey.



Smithfield
Public School

Survey for Parents: Provision of Education for students with a disability or special needs.

Dear Parents,

We have been invited to make a submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Provision of Education for students with a Disability or Special needs. We would like to do so with your input to support a series of recommendations to the NSW government.

Please respond to the following and return to your class teacher by Wednesday 17th February, 2017.

1. Please describe the process of accessing support/special placement for your child.

2. Is your child receiving all the support they need to access the school curriculum? Yes/No
If no, what additional support does he/she require?

3. Do you have any concerns about the transition points of schooling i.e: EIU to Kindergarten, Preschool to Kindergarten, Year 6 to High School? Yes / No

4. What has given you the greatest concern/joy in enrolling your child at Smithfield Primary School?

5. Have we missed anything? If so, please add or make a comment.

Many thanks
Cheryl McBride OAM

Bitia Christos

Principal

Deputy Principal Special Education

Commencing Wednesday, 11th February, 2017 73 teachers at Smithfield Public School received the following survey.



Smithfield
Public School

Survey for Teachers: Provision of Education for students with a disability or special needs.

Dear Teachers,

Please respond to the following by Wednesday 17th February, 2017.

1. Please describe the process of applying for support/special placement for children.

2. Are all the students in your class able to access the school curriculum? Yes/No
If no, what additional support is required?

3. Do you have any concerns about the transition points of schooling i.e: EIU to Kindergarten, Preschool to Kindergarten, Year 6 to High School? Yes / No

4. Please comment on the impact of the Government's 'Every Student Every School' (ESES) policy on the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs in New South Wales public schools.

5. Do you have any other additional concerns or comments?




Many thanks
Cheryl McBride OAM
Principal

Bitia Christos
Deputy Principal Special Education



SURVEY RESULTS

Within a week, 57 surveys were received from parents and teachers. The following trends were clearly identified:


Q1 PROCESS OF APPLICATION AND ACCESSING SUPPORT


-  80% of parents reported that the process of applying for a support class was laborious. Local schools completed the applications often having limited knowledge of the child. This was compounded by parents needing to see pediatricians, who had long waits for an appointment and were also costly, in order to obtain a diagnosis for a disability confirmation, for the application to be processed.
-  50% of parents felt the process was disempowering. Parents reported that limited support was given to them about the process and information about the different special education settings. Parents with limited English skills found that the process was challenging as there was limited support and it was difficult to understand the process.
-  65% of parents reported that they felt disadvantaged when applying for special education placements, compared to parents with children without a disability. Parents referred to choice of school being a major disadvantage. Parents reported that they were frustrated as there were limited school options discussed. Parents reported that they were not informed about where various special schools are located and which schools had support classes. Visiting support units at other schools was discouraged until a place was offered.

Q2 SUPPORT TO ACCESS CURRICULUM


-  85% of support unit teachers, reported that support unit classes in a mainstream school attracts few resources. A classroom is provided and the class is staffed by a specialist teacher and a school learning support officer.
-  85% teachers reported that in 2016, 3 additional classes for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) were established. A one off grant of \$38, 700 was received to furnish, repair, refurbish and equip the rooms. Thereafter, each support class receives an annual lump sum of \$300. These amounts are totally inadequate to purchase/replace the many kinesthetic resources required to assist


children's learning. The larger initiated sum was quickly consumed by furniture, technology and refurbishing the rooms.

-  90% of teachers stated that therapy services for children with special needs are non-existent. The children enrolled in a support unit in a mainstream school have no access to therapy services or resources. Many of our students, especially those in the Early Intervention Unit, need therapy. The families are reliant mostly on community service providers. The process to access is lengthy and requires a good understanding of English. Many of our families mostly speak their home language and find it very difficult to traverse the paperwork required. This includes access to early interventions. Their disadvantage exacerbates the disability. Frequently children arrive in the kindergarten autism classes without having experienced any early intervention programs.


-  90% of teachers reported that changing nappies/toileting children, take up the School Learning Support Officer and teachers time away from learning programs. There are frequently additional challenges that a child with a disability or special needs experiences e.g. a child with ASD may also have an intellectual disability and require toileting. In the Smithfield Early Intervention Unit there are 24 children who require nappy changing. This is time-consuming and takes the School Learning Support Officer (SLSO) away from supporting the educational and developmental tasks with which the children should be engaging. Despite this being known at the time of panel placement, an additional submission is required to secure funds for another School Learning Support Officer. Another time-consuming process!


Q3 TRANSITION POINTS


-  80% of parents reported that transitioning into a support class/specialised setting for children with special or additional needs, into kindergarten, was inadequate. 3 parents reported notifications of acceptance into support settings being as late as the last day of term 4, leaving no time for parents to visit settings before accepting placements and also no time for transitioning of children to the next setting.

-  30% of parents stated that transition into high school was also inadequate as there were limiting choices. Children who have Autism and no intellectual disability have support class options in Primary school but there are no such classes in the High School years leaving these students with no option other than enrolling into regular mainstream classes.


Q4 THE IMPACT OF THE GOVERNMENT'S 'EVERY STUDENT EVERY SCHOOL' (ESES) POLICY. (Teachers survey)


-  Teachers reported that 'high quality outcomes' as mentioned in the ESES policy can be achieved through greater curriculum support for teachers and through the development of high quality curriculum documents for special education. Early intervention needs an updated support document and greater support in the form of curriculum documents in developing high quality programs. The operational guidelines for early intervention were published in 2000 and need to be reviewed and updated in order to provide high quality outcomes for students with a disability.

-  90% of teachers reported that greater professional learning is needed that is specific for teachers in special education. Funding also needs to be specifically allocated for special education teachers to attend professional learning courses.

-  100% of teachers reported that they did not feel special schools had been developed as 'centres of expertise. Whilst funding had been allocated to special schools for projects, there results and findings are not published or easily accessible to other schools such as Smithfield to see.

Q5 ADDITIONAL ISSUES IDENTIFIED BY PARENTS AND TEACHERS

-  Teachers stated that very limited school funds are available to the Support unit for resources and professional learning. Smithfield Public schools receives no additional funding to support the unit and all funds allocated through the resource allocation model are expended on learning programs for the mainstream school.

-  In the teacher survey it was identified that the Deputy Principal Support has challenging workloads with very little off class time. Smithfield Public School welcomes children with disability/special needs and their families. Approximately 75 children with disabilities are enrolled in the 7 class support unit. The leader, a very capable and committed deputy principal, receives no additional allocation of release time to fulfil her role. She is allocated the same as any other classroom Teacher – 2 hours per week. She is expected to complete the many additional

administrative tasks associated with children with disability/special needs including the completion of at least 40-50 access requests each year, provision of transition programs for 40 children, orientation of new children and families, construction of social stories, professional learning and development of 7 teachers and 7 school learning support officers, application and monitoring of taxi transport. Impossible task!

- ✚ Teachers reported that the needs and attention required by the families of children with disability/special needs and the children themselves are understandably significant. This impacts on the leadership and administration of the school. No additional allocation of time for office staff, general assistant or leaders are provided.

Influx of Refugee Student with Disabilities/Special Needs

- ✚ Teachers reported that more support is needed for newly arrived refugee families who have children with disabilities. Smithfield Public School welcomes more than 80 refugee children in the past 18 months. Some have been children with disability/special needs. Most of these children have no diagnosis and have not previously attended school. The impact on teacher/leader/administration time to support these vulnerable families is very significant. Their transition to the classroom has been challenging. No knowledge of routine or understanding of English created a difficult beginning.

Taxi Transport


- ✚ 100% of teachers reported that special transport application processes and the time taken to process the application, needs to be reviewed as they are not efficient. At the times of this submission (5 weeks into the school year) some of the children have not been placed on a regular transport route. The principal, deputy principal and teachers are currently transporting a Down's Syndrome child to and from school while the taxi transport is organised. This happy but challenging Syrian refugee needs every opportunity that school can offer. The impact on staff is significant!


Counsellor Time


- ✚ The survey results indicated that teachers said more school counselling time is needed for the support unit, particularly in the Early Intervention Unit where the

counselling time has been halved to 1 day a week to assess up to 32 students with special needs. In 2016 Smithfield Public School welcomed the addition of 3 classes for Autism Spectrum Disorder children and those with a moderate intellectual disability. The mainstream numbers increased. The school community eagerly awaited the allocation of additional school counsellor time. They were disappointed to find that their allocation was reduced from 1.0 (5dpw) to 0.8 (4dpw). The principal requested an explanation. No plausible response was received.

Inflexible Formulae

-  Teachers reported that the formula for placing students does not consider the whole child. Some students are recognised through the factor of need formula. However, this is only for Autism Spectrum Disorder students who have a moderate intellectual disability. Those with a mild intellectual disability and any other special need are funded for the autism only. In 2015, 2 children in the support unit were unsuitable candidates and should have been placed in a special school. An application for additional support resulted in \$400 for a semester. As a result of the stress, the teacher was forced to take leave. She subsequently resigned and Smithfield Public School lost one of its best teachers.

-  Inadequacy of facility for Children in the Early Intervention Unit (EIU)

-  Teachers reported that Early Intervention Units need additional funding to meet national regulations that all other early childhood services need to meet. The EIU is located in an old classroom. It has recently been painted and new cupboards installed. There is no facility for the children to access an outdoor play area that is custom built for pre-schoolers with multiple disabilities. There is no OHS standard around nappy changing or resources provided. The lack of physical resources would immediately result in a fail if the accreditation authority assessed this facility against the expected standards that other early childhood settings are bound by.

BREACH OF AUSTRALIAN DISABILITIES STANDARDS FOR EDUCATION

The Australian Disabilities Standards were constructed by the Attorney General to support the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1992 and came into effect in August 2005. The education standards provide a framework to ensure that students with disabilities are able to access and participate in education on the same basis as their able peers. The DDA makes it unlawful to contravene a disability standard.

At Smithfield Public School:

- ✚ There is frequently inadequate funding to support a child with disabilities/special needs in the mainstream and support unit.
- ✚ Inflexible staffing formulae result in inadequate teaching/learning opportunities for children with disabilities / special needs.
- ✚ Often a child's primary disability only is recognised and funded/resourced. Other disabilities are not.
- ✚ Some class sizes are excessive and do not allow teachers to sufficiently implement individualised learning programs. The children are then restricted from accessing the curriculum. No consideration is given to the time and attention required by children with disability/special needs.
- ✚ There are insufficient places available in SSP's. Consequently students are placed in our support unit where the resources are inadequate to meet the child's needs. At times, a child's safety has been at risk due to an inappropriate placement.
- ✚ There is insufficient counselling support ie Smithfield Public School has 560 mainstream students and 75 students in a support unit and receives only 4 dpw school counsellor.
- ✚ Smithfield Public School has little opportunity or funding to access professionals/experts needed by child with a disability/special needs to assist their learning, mobility, communication etc.
- ✚ The Principal is sometimes placed in a position whereby she feels compelled to enrol a child with a disability/special needs knowing that she is not able to provide the necessary supports and resources that a child requires to fully access the curriculum.
- ✚ The pressure to do so from NSW DoE personnel is significant.
- ✚ Parents are sometimes forced to accept enrolment placements that they know are not sufficient for their child due to a lack of special placements available. They are given no better alternative.

- Parents are also compelled by DoE staff to complete requests for resources that are totally inadequate for their children e.g. A parents may be told to ask for Integration Funding support (i.e. money to support a mainstream placement) when the child requires a special school.

SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

The following case studies provide evidence of inadequate resourcing for students with special needs/disabilities and their teachers.

CASE STUDIES

1. Impact on teaching staff

Mrs T who is an experienced special needs teacher, teaching in excess of 20 years was teaching an Autism class for students with moderate intellectual disabilities. The class consisted of 8 students who had multiple disabilities and challenging behaviours. 2 students were reviewed and needed a placement in a special school. The placement of the students did not occur until the following year due to a classes in special schools being full. Mrs T was hit, kicked, punched, bitten as was the teachers aid. In some instances, medical attention was required. Emergency funding was applied for as these challenges occurred on a daily basis. A total of \$650 was received through emergency funding for the semester equating to 8 min of additional teacher aide time per day. The constant challenging behaviour caused Mrs T do go on stress leave as her mental wellbeing was being compromised. The following year Mrs T relinquished her position from the Department of Education.

2.Placement

In 2016, 3 families from the Early Intervention Program were anxiously awaiting the outcome of their access request for placement of their child for kindergarten 2017. One of the parents, Mrs K, was in tears on many occasions, as many of the kindergarten orientation and transition programs had ended at many schools. Mrs K and the early intervention teacher were informed by the department to enrol Mrs K's autistic son in their local school. This caused greater despair for Mrs K and unnecessary confusion for her child to transition to their local school and then later receive an offer of placement in a different school. All three families began the transition to their local school. In the last week of term 4 2016, all three families received an offer for a support class. Early intervention teachers felt helpless as they were unable to provide an effective transition for the children and the receiving school. Children were confused as transition for Kindergarten began at their local school and they were suddenly attending a different school, which is particularly

challenging for children with Autism. Parents were left disappointed and distressed about their child's transition into kindergarten.

3. Appropriate Resources

B, is a 4-year-old child enrolled at Smithfield, in the Early Intervention Unit. B has Cerebral Palsy which has caused B to have severe physical impairment and no mobility. B needed 1:1 adult support to lift her and engage her in all routines during the day. B also needed specialised equipment to support her move around the room and sit in a specifically modified chair. None of the above was provided when she started at Smithfield. The School Learning Support Officer and teacher had to take turns in providing the 1:1 care without any specialised equipment. To access support to get specialised equipment B needed an occupational therapist to recommend the equipment before the application could be processed, B was on a waitlist and waited over 6 months for a therapist and then another 3 months before equipment was received. This process almost took an entire year before the child could access the curriculum with the right resources, without a teacher having to hold her.

4. Refugee Support special needs children

S is a child with a disability and is also a refugee from Syria. She enrolled at Smithfield in 2016. S, attended a special school in Syria but did not have any paperwork to confirm a disability. S was unable to apply for a support class as there was not a disability confirmation. S had to wait for a paediatrician to assess her before an application could be made for a support class. S was therefore enrolled into a mainstream class of 30 with 1 teacher with no funding. It took almost a year before S was able to get the paperwork needed to apply for the Support class. The classroom teacher had to cope with very limited support, with a child who was later assessed as having a moderate intellectual disability.

5. Professional Learning Funding for support staff (SLSO)

Smithfield has a team of 7 teachers and 8 School Learning Support Officers (SLSO). T is an SLSO who has been newly appointed. She has limited experience with working with children with Autism. T, is keen and willing to learn about the best strategies to use with children who have autism. There are a number of courses and conferences which would greatly benefit T, but unfortunately schools do not receive any funding for professional learning to support School Learning Support Officers.

6. Library allocation for special needs

Mrs X is a support unit teacher who has a class of 9 students and a SLSO to support

her and the children. Mrs X would like her students to attend the library. In 2016 Smithfield Public School had allocation of library time for all mainstream classes. Despite having an additional 3 Autism classes no library time is allocated to any of the support classes. Teachers are able to use the library during the librarian's release time but have to do this without the support of the teacher librarian unlike the mainstream children who have an allocated library time.

IMPACT

1. STUDENTS

At Smithfield Public Students, students with disabilities/special needs are enrolled in mainstream classes, who are inadequately supported with funding, struggle with all aspects of school life. Similarly, students who are inappropriately placed in a support unit when their needs require the better resources and facilities available in a special school, also face daily challenges. Depending on the nature of the need/disability students may be unable to:

- ✚ Engage in the full curriculum because they cannot attend or remain on task without individual and/or specific instruction.
- ✚ Manage challenging and/or anti-social behaviours without specialist/professional support and/or smaller class size.
- ✚ Establish satisfying social/emotional relationships with peers without individual support in the classroom and playground.
- ✚ Safely traverse a playground where 530 mainstream students play soccer, handball and running games.
- ✚ Access a curriculum that is modified and supported by technology/ resources to ensure its relevance to the child's learning needs.
- ✚ Students with disabilities/special needs enrolled in mainstream and the support unit at Smithfield Public School are often unable to fully participate in school life.

They are impeded by:

- A lack of recognition for multiple disabilities (beyond the identified 'primary') so that additional resources are not provided for additional need.

- A lack of counselling facilities affect children with disability/special needs and their families more significantly than others at Smithfield Public School. Inadequate allocation results in extended waiting periods for assessment, communication with medical personnel supporting the child and applications for funding/special placement. Limitations of school counselling result in a lack of therapy and counselling, both of which are much needed by all students.
- ✚ Some children at Smithfield Public school have waited for extensive periods of time for placement in a supported facility. The effect of waiting is devastating for the child's esteem and achievement. The impact on other students in the class can be major.

2.PARENTS

- ✚ Parents of children with special and/or additional needs feel disempowered by the application process. Limited support was given to families when applying for a support class/ special school.
- ✚ Parents felt disadvantaged when transitioning their child to a new setting. Parents felt there was limited choice, they are unable to visit school prior to processing the application for placement.
- ✚ Applying for DoE services is challenging for parents. Often parents need pediatrician reports before counsellors can do the disability confirmation. There are often long wait times up to 6 months for some pediatricians and a large cost is also involved which many parents struggle to afford.

3.TEACHERS


- ✚ Teachers are overwhelmed and physically exhausted due to the lack of additional support and resources for students who have high additional support needs. School Learning Support Officers (SLSO) and teachers feel that a great deal of their time is focusing on individual challenging behaviours and nappy changing which disrupts learning programs.


- ✚ Teachers have limited funding and allocation of resources due to no additional funds given to schools for support unit classes.
- ✚ Greater support is needed for teachers for professional learning. Teachers feel overwhelmed and need to be supported by the development of high quality support curriculum and continuum documents that are specific for special education.


RECCOMENDATIONS


The Smithfield Public School community calls on the NSW government and the NSW Department of Education to fulfil their legal and ethical responsibilities to:


- ✚ Increase the numbers of places available in special schools in the local Fairfield area to enable all high support need students' access to an appropriate learning environment. This may require the construction of a new school.
- ✚ Recognise that some students with disabilities/special needs require more support than the formulae dictate. Provide adequate levels of funding in a timely manner.
- ✚ Give expert advice re physical resources required by student and provide them in a timely manner.
- ✚ Increase school counselling time to recognise the increase demand of a large support unit, (1.2)
- ✚ Enable the Deputy Principal – special education to be class free so that all her responsibilities can be met.
- ✚ Provide some administration allocation to support the demands of the families and children in the support unit. (0.5)
- ✚ Increase the Learning and Support program (1.6) to cater for the many learning challenges in the mainstream at Smithfield Public School and as identified by the National Consistent Collection of Data on students with a Disability.


-  Assist our parents to access Therapy services.


-  Provide funding for the professional learning of the School Learning Support Officer who support children with disability/special needs at Smithfield Public School.


-  Ensure that transport services are provided in an organised and timely manner.

-  Provide resources to ensure that the Early Intervention Unit complies with the standards established for all Early Childhood facilities.

-  Improve the access request process so that it is efficient.

-  Update and create high quality curriculum support and continuum documents for special education teachers.

-  Support classes to be included in the library allocation of schools.

-  Funding specific for professional learning of special education teachers.