

**Submission
No 176**

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

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Response to: Students with a disability or special needs in New South Wales schools

My response focuses on the first two of the inquiry's terms of reference:

a) equitable access to resources for students with a disability or special needs in regional and metropolitan areas

From my experience in a range of rural and remote schools, the answer is that there remains many problems in providing resources for students with a disability. These include a lack of resources, in terms of both finance and professional expertise:

- Financial assistance that allows the school to provide specialist training and support for the teachers involved, and for the provision of Student Learning & Support Offices (SLSO's). This is a difficult area for Government, as the need (the % of children identified with a disability) seems to be constantly rising, and the proportion of these in Government schools high.
 - The criteria for allocating funding has been tightened, but with no fundamental review of its basis. This means that the children who attract most funding have physical disabilities or health needs. Children with autism are a growing group, and also tend to be better catered for. Whilst it is important that these needs are met, it often leaves students with less visible needs to sink or swim.
 - The computerized and bureaucratic process for making application for support (in Government schools at least) is cumbersome, time consuming and less inclusive of parents. It is a system that suits middle management, but creates problems at the school level. The completion of a word document was far more efficient and inclusive. Cumbersome systems use up limited resources.
- The availability of specialist teachers, speech therapists, behavioural specialist (part of mental health), paediatricians, occupational therapists, in rural areas at least, remains problematic.

One of the largest groups of students with disabilities who frequently do not attract any resources are those with a Mild Intellectual (IM) delay. The only avenue of support is through an IM support class, and very few rural schools have these. IM students have significant needs, particularly in secondary classes. The gap between them and their peers increases with time, and adolescence brings further significant challenges. Their needs are more aligned to a life skills programme, and whilst this curriculum might be attempted by a school, they generally do not have the resources or teaching skills necessary. Mild delay students require continued literacy and numeracy training, but secondary schools and their teachers are much more focused on the curriculum. When schools had STLA's, the needs of these students were often better catered for.

b) the impact of the government's "Every Student Every School" policy on the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs in public schools

This policy has been a mixed blessing. *On the negative side:*

- development of the Learning and Support Teacher (LaST) position, replacing 9 categories of specialist support teachers - It seems that the attempt was to roll all these specialists into one highly skilled and incredibly proficient teacher (see the role statement for the outstanding abilities required of a LaST). They were then to provide consultation and oversight for staff faced with children with special needs. This removed many of the previous "specialist teachers" from a direct provision of teaching and support to students, which had been at least part of their role. Teachers appointed as LaSTs have struggled with their role. Of necessity they initially focus on the administrative part of the job – organising and managing learning

support teams (LST) in the school, applying for support funding, co-ordinating with parents, making sure documentation is completed, etc. Much of this work in the past was more informal and based on consultation between staff at the stage level of the child. It would happen on a needs basis, and be part of the professional judgement of teachers and that of others directly involved with the student. Specialist staff were called upon on a needs basis. There is good evidence that the LaST position has diverted resources from the students and classrooms where it was previously provided, and created more meetings and far more documentation. It seems to be based on the idea that if we force teachers to consider and document plans for the needs of children with disabilities, then this will improve the actual support that these children are given. However creating a bureaucratic process which diverts resources away from the classroom is counterproductive.

- By diversion of resources, “**Every Student Every School**” has decreased the ability of staff to access expert support and consistent, reliable information about identifying and supporting the educational needs of students with a disability.
- If you are not adequately resourced, you can’t do the job asked of you. ESES policy did not address resourcing needs. It has always been a puzzle to me as to why you would spend about \$100,000 pa employing a teacher, and then provide them with only \$600 for classroom consumables and resources.

You can’t replace the need for resources with a process that tries to demand more from staff, most of whom are already carrying high workloads.

On the positive side:

- Many LaSTs have improved the access of students to specialist staff external to the department. This is largely due to their persistence and follow up, something which has been difficult for classroom teachers in the past simply due to time pressures – despite popular belief, most teachers carry very high workloads and are time poor
- Professional learning for staff has become more access able and more important – a process that will lead to improved skills and professionalism. The idea of providing teachers with reflective and planning time, as well as access to specialist staff, has been shown to lift student outcomes. There remains a need to provide and develop this time and colligate processes, for it to lead to gradual improvements at the school level.

Without adequate resources, outcomes for students with disabilities will continue to be limited. In many cases this remains the limiting factor. At the same time, how these resources are used is just as critical, and needs to be based on a good knowledge of educational practise and organisational effectiveness. There is a tendency to try for the radical, pressurised change, rather than a gradual, reflective and qualitative development of a quality organisation. A properly appraised “evidence base” is a key ingredient, and it often seems that change programmes are heralded as “evidence based”, when in fact there is little scrutiny of this “evidence”. Having worked in other organizations, I am aware that the development of a learning culture within the NSW DoE is an important organizational goal that is not being adequately addressed.