

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

Organisation: The Professional Association for Learning Support (PALS)

Date received: 26 February 2017

PALS Submission to the Inquiry: Students with a disability or special needs in NSW Schools.

The Professional Association for Learning Support (PALS) was established in 1996, as a professional association for all professionals who work in support roles related to **learning**.

This includes class teachers; specialist teachers; speech pathologists; psychologists; occupational therapists and medical practitioners.

The Professional Association for Learning Support is administered by the Professional Teachers' Council NSW. An elected committee directs all professional activities.

Our Association aims to:

- actively support Learning Support personnel
- alert members to appropriate resources and professional activities
- establish and maintain links between all bodies involved in learning support
- establish a professional network through all levels of education
- share knowledge of best practice

provide a representative voice for all learning support personnel

To follow is our submission to

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

Access to resources varies between regional and metropolitan areas and between sectors.

Our experience in regional areas has revealed

-the isolation of Learning and Support (LaS) Teachers in rural schools and

their lack of training and support. Many state that they have been appointed to the role as there was no one else available to take up the position. They find it difficult to travel to metropolitan areas for seminars and there is very little support from supervising teachers. As an Association we are trying to address this need by taking our seminars to regional areas and are currently attempting to offer webinars.

- Many of the rural communities have students who cannot access other services vital to their support e.g psychologists, speech pathologists.

Our experience in running seminars across the sectors has revealed the following

- there are many more teachers in the role of learning support in non-government schools. Many non-government schools have learning Support Departments with a Head Teacher whilst a nearby government school may have a part time teacher with no support.

The consequences of this lack of resources in government schools is reflected in the number of applications made for Disability Provisions for the HSC. This usually results each year in the media accusing the private schools of exploiting the system.

Our Association recently ran two seminars, one in Bankstown and one in Bathurst on Disability Provisions. At Bankstown we had 105 teachers in attendance. Only 32 came from Government schools. The Seminar was conducted by the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) personnel and participants who attended the seminar reported being more confident in making applications. In 2015 Government schools made 8.0% of the applications whereas Independent schools represented 13.2% of the applications. The candidature was 73,408 students. It is not unreasonable to expect that if government schools are better resourced with more secondary LaS Teachers then the application rate would be higher. As it is the data suggests thousands of students in our government schools are not applying for Disability Provisions even though they may be eligible.

In some instances the application process involves the intervention and supporting evidence provided by professionals such as psychologists and speech pathologists. Many private schools have more ready access to these professionals and parents are often more proactive in getting their children accessed.

Often LaS Teachers are not given the time in their allocation to conduct the necessary assessments required for learning difficulty applications. Again in non-government schools there are teachers employed for this purpose alone. NESA in some instances requires a reading comprehension assessment as part of the application and recommend school use the York Assessment for Reading Comprehension. To conduct this assessment (most likely to be

completed by the LaS teacher) takes approximately 1 hour per student. In addition to collecting teacher feedback and other required evidence for the application.

Access to specialized programs

One of our members has submitted the following statement

Students who progress to High School without learning to read need to be given more resources. For students to overcome gaps in acquiring reading Skills they need intensive programs that can be accessed several times a week including withdrawal from class.

These resources are labour intensive and time consuming but to be effective such resources are reasonable. Even though students have been given resources in primary school and even though immediate outcomes may not indicate significant increases in ability the resources invested are justifiable
23/02/2017

In many schools LaS Teachers cannot provide these interventions for a number of reasons

- The school structure /policy does not allow withdrawal
- There are no trained staff to provide the intervention.
- There is no framework that supports intervention.
- There is no staff to provide the intervention (many LaST allocations are part-time.
- The students needing these interventions have not been identified and /or the most appropriate intervention.

Our teachers often speak about the demands of their position. The following extract from an email illustrates this point.

I attended the PAL seminar yesterday and it was great to be surrounded by so many teachers that are involved with supporting the learning of students that require additional support.

I work in a medium sized school in the private sector and am the only Learning Support teacher for yrs 5-12. My days are hectic, trying to meet the needs of student (the demands of parents) and supporting the teachers. One area I am currently struggling with is supporting students that are completing the Life Skills program due to their intellectual disability. We have several students all in different grades and finding adequate resources at the level of the student for each subject is proving difficult (impossible). One teacher spent 12 hrs writing a unit of study on Vikings, this level of additional work (after hours) is not sustainable.

Another teacher has stated

I find that by the time I complete regular admin, for tasks such as SWD census and communication with parents over individual Learning plans, satisfy the required adjustments for separate supervision of students for common assessment tasks and the other random tasks that pop up I have no regular time left to work out of class with teachers to plan suitable teaching programs with required adjustments.

My major current concern is catering for increased number of students with reading disorders, particularly dyslexia. Again it takes time to explore useful technologies that may assist and then the time to go around and instruct both teachers and students on how to implement.

Numbers of students requiring adjustments are on the increase, particularly in the area of mental health and anxiety, applying greater pressure on all teachers with no additional specialist support.

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 New South Wales public schools.

One immediate impact of the Government's 'Every Students Every School' policy has been an awareness that the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs is a whole school responsibility and there has been a noticeable increase in the training modules available to teachers. Programs that withdrew students from their schools or class have ceased.

However it has not resulted in the placement of specialised and/or experienced teachers capable to effectively take up the role of a LaS Teacher. At our seminars and professional learning days we are constantly meeting teachers who feel very undertrained for their position. Many have no training at all. Others may have completed online courses but have no practicum experience where they are trained and given appropriate feedback on their ability to work with students with diverse learning needs

The following is the Role Statement for Learning and Support Teachers in government schools

The Learning and Support Teacher will:

- work collaboratively with the classroom teacher to support assessment for learning of their students with additional educational needs and identify specific learning and support needs

- plan, implement, model, monitor and evaluate teaching programs for students with additional learning and support needs in conjunction with regular classroom teachers
- plan, implement, model, monitor and evaluate personalised adjustments for learning where required, with the classroom teacher, student and/or parent or carer
- model exemplary classroom practice when tailoring adjusted learning programs for students with additional learning needs
- provide direct support for students with additional learning and support needs through a range of strategies (including direct instruction, delivery of adjusted learning programs, assessment and monitoring of progress) including the areas of social integration, language and communication, literacy, numeracy and behaviour. This may include students with confirmed disabilities.
- provide professional specialist advice, support and mentoring to classroom teachers on: - how best to cater for the diverse learning needs in their classrooms, and
- how to effectively work in partnership with families to maximise learning opportunities for students at school and at home
- provide professional specialist advice and assistance about students with additional learning needs to the school's learning and support team
- assist with professional learning for class teachers and school learning support officers within their school and local network of schools where appropriate.

These criteria demand a highly trained experienced teacher who has the respect of their colleagues due to their experience and qualifications. Consequently we as the Professional Association for LaS Teachers believe that

- Las Teacher positions should be a Promotions position
- All LaS Teachers should be highly trained or have extensive experience to meet the demands of this position.

Ideally all positions should be full-time and permanent.

Part time positions do not work in High Schools. A teacher who only attends a few days of the week cannot work with classes for all of their periods in a subject area and it makes team teaching almost impossible. Missing some of the lessons in a unit of work makes it very difficult for all concerned.

Basing the allocation on NAPLAN results does not take in the full range of learning needs.

D) Complaint and review mechanisms within the school systems in New South Wales for parents and carers.

One LaS teacher stated

In my experience I tend to encourage my parents to persist in attaining what is needed for their child, which usually means making an appointment with the Principal and highlight the Disability Standards for Education and Discrimination Act. Many parents are hesitant to complain because they think this will target their child and the school will see them

as unappreciative of what the school has already done.

E) Any other related matters.

As a professional Association we have always believed that all interventions should be based on best practice.

In past years we have run courses on the Effective Teaching of Vocabulary and the framework Response to Intervention. In his book 'Visible Learning for Teachers' John Hattie (2012) examines the interventions that impact effectively on student learning according to their effect size in meta-analyses. Of a list of 150 influences on Achievement, Response to Intervention and Vocabulary programs ranked 3rd and 17th respectively.

Response to Intervention is a framework that requires whole school initiatives, ongoing staff development, collaborative practice and ongoing monitoring of student achievement. It is also a framework that supports effective interventions with students with special learning needs. It requires that those teachers working with students with identified learning needs are highly trained and that the interventions on an individual basis are supported in the classroom.

Effective vocabulary programs work for ALL students not just those with special learning needs.

A framework such as Response to Intervention is needed to effectively support the work of LaS Teachers. The framework requires that no intervention is implemented without the data to support the intervention. This would be the ideal strategy to base decisions relating to the allocation of resources particularly the allocation of the LaS teacher. At present one of the great stress factors for our teachers is that in many schools there is no clear framework or policy that determines their role within the school.

Submission submitted by
of PALS

Secretary/Treasurer on behalf

We do not object to the publication of this submission with the name of our Association.