

**Submission
No 180**

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

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

I have worked as a learning support teacher for 24 years, 10 of those in NSW public schools. My work is mostly with students who have high incidence disabilities and it is mostly focused on helping these students learn to read. I have found that it is very difficult to find time for intensive intervention for students with disability. I am particularly concerned that many of these students are not developing adequate literacy abilities and that this will limit their capacity in adult life to participate in society and the economy. Reading and writing are not easy to learn, and students with disability rarely develop proficiency in these areas without substantial support.

As an experienced learning support teacher, I have developed strategies to assist students in the small amount of time available. However, this is almost always via small group work. This is effective for most of the low-achieving students, but those few who are not able to keep up with a group need more intensive intervention. Students with diagnosed disabilities very often fall into this category. In terms of the Response to Intervention model (slightly different from the three-tiered intervention model as it is being implemented in NSW schools through the Early Action for Success program) this means these students have shown poor response to Tier 2 intervention and need a Tier 3 intervention. However, Tier 3 requires a good deal of teacher time, and it can rarely be found. In other words, there are enough resources to meet the needs of most students with additional learning needs, but not enough to meet the needs of some. This is where I believe the greatest need for additional funding lies.

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.

Guidelines for the role: I have worked in NSW public schools as a learning support teacher before, during and since the implementation of "Every Student Every School." I have found many aspects of the policy helpful to me in my work. I was especially pleased to see the amendment to the "Guidelines for the Role" document which replaced the usual "Other duties as directed" with a clear prohibition on using support teachers to cover classes.

Before the new guidelines came out, I was frequently asked to do this. As support teachers are always working within the parameters of trying to address many learning needs in a limited time, I arrange my timetable so that students are assigned the least time possible that will enable them to make progress. When my time was diverted into covering classes, the teaching time available was less than I had planned for, and during the weeks this happened, student progress would stall. However, the change to the "Guidelines for the role" only meant that I could refuse without risk of being disciplined, not that school executives would cease to ask me.

My consistent refusal has had adverse consequences for me. I have been accused of standing in the way of professional learning (at a school where the common practice was for support staff to cover classes to enable classroom teachers to engage in professional learning), not being a team player, and ignoring the value of goodwill between staff and the school executive. I am mindful that being able to refuse despite these social sanctions is a luxury I have as a permanent employee of the

Department. Where the role of Learning and Support Teacher is being filled by a temporary teacher, such refusal could result in a school finding it no longer had need of that teacher's services. Temporary teachers cannot afford to trade goodwill for the consistent instruction that is necessary for students with disability to progress in learning.

My experience is not unique. I hear from other Learning and Support Teachers that they too are still asked to cover classes. I believe more steps need to be taken to change the culture among school leadership about the importance of consistent learning support for students with disability, and that steps need to be taken to provide consequences for school leaders who continue in their attempts to breach this clear prohibition on misusing support staff this way. It may be that there needs to be a review of school staffing requirements to find out why school leaders experience a gap in staffing that they believe can only be filled by support staff.

Emphasis on capacity building: I feel that the emphasis on learning support staff building the capacity of classroom teachers to better meet the needs of a diverse range of students has diverted resources away from the direct teaching of these students. Teachers of students with disability need more than additional skill, they need additional time for individual attention, and learning support staff cannot give them that. In theory, the presence of support staff in the classroom can free up class teacher time to work with students with disability. However, any skills the class teacher learns from the support teacher can rarely be put into practice when there is no second teacher in the room.

Additionally, the lesson focus is often unsuitable for students with disability. They need extensive and intensive instruction and practice of skills that are often more than a year or two below the curriculum level at which the lesson is pitched. This cannot always be fully compensated for by differentiation. For example, students in Year 2 who have not yet learned all their letter sounds or basic sight words are in a learning environment where this content is no longer delivered. It is reinforced by curriculum content, but not taught. So it is common for students with disability to continue into Stage 2 with a persistent deficit in these foundational abilities.

I believe students with disability are better served by specialist teachers who can develop and teach a structured lesson series tailored to their individual needs in a systematic way, and this does not mesh well with the gears of the classroom program. I believe it is time to remove the stigma from withdrawal programs and give them their rightful place as an important component of learning support, when they are finely targeted, limited in time and duration, and pre- and post-assessed to show that the time students have spent out of class was worth the sacrifice. I would recommend that the Committee look at the Response to Intervention model, which addresses many of the problems Every Student Every School was designed to address in a clear structured process.

Response to Intervention starts with regular (yearly or twice yearly) broad assessment of whole year groups and more frequent assessment of students at risk to ensure that no students are falling through the cracks. It then improves class programs with effective differentiation (Tier 1 intervention) so that fewer students need further support. Students who are still not making satisfactory progress are referred for small group support, in the classroom or outside, by specialist teachers or SLSOs under specialist supervision (Tier 2 intervention). Students whose difficulties persist after small group intervention that has been generally effective, ie effective for most of the students participating, are referred for intensive, individualised instruction from a specialist teacher

(Tier 3 intervention). Parts of this model are being adopted by the Early Action for Success program, but the interventions it considers Tier 3 are not as intensive as the original model recommends. This could be because, as I have found at the local level, current school funding is insufficient to cover the cost of genuine, effective Tier 3 intervention.

In schools where Early Action for Success is being implemented, the capacity of classroom teachers is being addressed by Instructional Leaders, which could free Learning and Support Teachers to work directly with students. If this is done within a strong, easily understood model like Response to Intervention, and funded adequately to provide effective Tier 3 intervention, I believe there would be great benefits for students with disability.

Finding new ways: The induction materials for "Every Student Every School" emphasised that we need to find new ways to stop students falling through the cracks. However, innovation is not always welcome. I have found a poor level of knowledge among school executive about the nature of the learning problems students with disability face and the need for new ways to address it. They continue to present materials designed for whole-class instruction to be used as the starting point in planning learning support. There is little understanding of the fundamental difference between initial instruction and intervention for students who have not grasped the content of initial instruction.

Intervention is quantitatively and qualitatively different from initial instruction. Support teachers do not have time to deliver the curriculum all over again, even if "more of the same" had not been shown by research to be ineffective. We need to identify and target roadblocks to learning and remove them in order to facilitate accelerated progress and return the students to the possibility of being able to benefit from the classroom program. In Response to Intervention terms, we need to transition students back to Tier 1.

I did a Master's degree in Special Education, as recommended in the Every Student Every School materials. However, it has left me with a more sophisticated understanding of the problems and their solutions than school executives have. In the two schools I have worked in since Every Student Every School began, one wished to preserve the status quo but get better results and the other wished to preserve line management and discouraged initiative from those working at teacher level. As a result of these attitudes, again not unique to my situation, students with disability are missing out on the full benefit of qualified staff.

I believe there is a need for mandatory professional development for Principals and other school executives to improve their understanding of the issues involved in effective learning support. I also believe there could be better understanding among school leaders of Disability Standards for Education and its implications for the implementation of learning support.

C) Developments since the 2010 inquiry by General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2 into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs and the implementation of its recommendations.

The implementation of the online training courses on various disabilities has been highly effective in my experience. I have done three of these courses. Concerns expressed during the 2010 inquiry that

they would only be effective for teachers with little existing knowledge were ill-founded. I found they catered for a wide range of existing knowledge. The online nature of the instruction meant that I could move quickly through content I already knew and spend more time on information that was new to me. The Assistant Principals Learning and Support (APLAs) who facilitated the courses were well trained and knowledgeable in the content and well equipped to support further discussion and to field questions. The courses included creating an intervention in our schools based on the new knowledge we had acquired and this increased the durability of our learning. The online forums where we contributed and read different perspectives on the course content from teachers working in different contexts and roles added another dimension to the knowledge I took away from the courses. I found my participation in these courses well worthwhile.

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

This item is outside of my knowledge and experience.

E) Any other related matters.

The impact on students with disability of NAPLAN testing: I am concerned that NAPLAN testing has unintended negative consequences for students with disability. Firstly, the pressure it puts schools under to improve test results for their students leads to pressure being put on teaching staff, including support staff, to improve test results. In some cases, this leads to a neglect of students who are likely to do poorly on NAPLAN tests even with support, in favour of more able students for whom learning support is more likely to boost NAPLAN scores. Some learning support teachers have been asked to focus their efforts away from students with disability and work with students who are more capable.

The test itself can be a distressing event for students with disability. The reading passages start at grade level and move up in difficulty from there. Students reading well below grade level cannot make a meaningful attempt at the test, but they are required to sit in the room and do something with the paper. I have seen a student turn the paper sideways to make it easier to shade in random bubbles. It can be a distressing experience for children to be asked to do something they cannot do. ACARA has resources to lower the difficulty level of the test, so it could be made more accessible and less distressing for students with disability and also provide meaningful data on how far below grade they are performing. Students working at grade level could move through a page of simpler questions quickly and get on to grade level work, while students with disability could be excused early, once they had completed as much as they could do, knowing that they had successfully answered some questions.

Related to this concern is the widespread practice I have observed of students being given books to read that are too hard for them. I believe this is partly a result of the above-mentioned pressure to improve results, and partly from a misguided belief that students with disability will respond as positively to a challenge as more capable students often do. In reality, these students often come to dislike reading intensely as all their experiences of reading are that as soon as it ceases to be an

irksome struggle, they get moved up to a higher level of text difficulty where reading again becomes an irksome struggle. Ironically, students with disability progress better if they are given plentiful opportunities to practice reading on text that is within their skill level.

Perhaps this level of pedagogy is outside the Committee's terms of reference, but it is possible that other measures included in its recommendations could take this sort of concern into account. Essentially, it is part of the need to improve knowledge among school leadership and Department staff about the nature of the difficulties students with disability face, and the nature of the solutions. The practices outlined above might not happen if caring teachers, school leaders and Education bureaucrats understood the consequences of what they are doing.