

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

**Organisation:** Coonabarabran High School - Staff

**Date received:** 26 February 2017

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26 February 2016

Dear Sir/Madam,

**Re :Submission to NSW Parliamentary Disability Inquiry**

On behalf of the staff at Coonabarabran High School I make the following comments by way of submission to the parliament's current Disability Inquiry.

- i) Like many schools, we have numerous students who require additional support due to a myriad of disabilities. In essence, there is not an adequate level of funding to support these students in enjoying equality of educational opportunity.
- ii) In terms of **mental health support**, at present we share an excellent School Counsellor with a number of other schools in our region. Necessarily, this involves a lot of time in the car for that Counsellor. What that means for our school is that at most we have Counsellor support 5 days out of 10. This is not enough. Increasingly over the past 5 years we have seen more students with complex mental health needs, including a rise in the number of students suffering from depression, anxiety, self harming behaviour and various other mental health issues. Add to this the fact that our town of Coonabarabran does not have a full time adolescent mental health counsellor. Often the only emergency support that can be offered to our student is a mental health VC assessment at the local hospital. Referral might be made to specialist in Dubbo but many of our families struggle to take their children such a distance for appointments and the waiting lists can be long when the child's health is at crisis point. We simply don't have the 'wrap around' services that larger centres can offer. Equally when a report is made to FACS and we are triaged via the Child Wellbeing Unit to access local services to support the child as the risk does not meet the legislative threshold of '*risk of significant harm*' there is simply not services in our town to support students with mental health issues. Ideally, our school and others like it should have Counsellor support for each school day as often that is the first point of call for students, especially if they come from homes where parents and carers are battling their own issues. Students cannot learn unless their wellbeing is properly supported.
- iii) Another significant issue for us is **students who have been diagnosed as Intellectually Moderate ( IM )** during their primary schooling and received support and yet when they reach high school, a diagnosis of IM does not attract funding

support. The following comments from my colleagues may prove insightful in this regard :

*'Having a School Learning Support Officer ( SLSO) working with the teacher allows classes to run more smoothly and keeps students with disabilities in mainstream classes with their peers and learning at an age appropriate rate. SLSO's help by keeping students on track, encouraging them and helping with writing down work if the student is a slow writer. This allows the teacher to help the other members of the class as well as the student with a disability. There are quite a few students at our school who have a documented disability but do not meet the requirements for funding – and these students can easily slip through the cracks when teaching in a busy classroom. Often they are not the loudest in the class but are really appreciative of any help and love it when they “get” a concept – as without assistance they often don't and this can lead to a negative cycle of disengagement .'*

*'When assisted by an aide, a student in Year r 9 Maths is helped to complete notes and work, primarily through assistance in copying and the verbalising of the questions. This obviously results in a reasonable level of participation. However, aiding is not provided for all lessons.*

*When an aide is not present, the child in question attempts to copy the notes and complete the questions but often makes mistakes and takes a great deal longer due to their diagnosed inability to read and hence write.*

*The teacher makes an effort to assist this student, but obviously can only apply a couple of minutes at a time to each and every student, so the student has to be left to their own efforts for the majority of the lesson.*

*If funding is provided for a student due to their learning difficulties, what possible explanation is there for providing '2 hours' or '6 hours' per week?*

*Their learning difficulties are not cyclic, intermittent, nor timetabled.*

*The fact that we need to 'combine' student funded assistance by placing students together in classes in an attempt to 'share' aiding time indicates that the levels are not satisfactory. You don't give someone with a broken leg a crutch for '6 hours per week'. '*

Our school's Learning and Support Teacher does a wonderful job spreading aide time across classes as best she can but the reality is that too often, students with disabilities do not attract any integration funding and when they do the level is insufficient. Accordingly, despite the best efforts of our dedicated staff who are committed to implementing Personalised Learning Plans and differentiating the curriculum, the reality is that in busy classrooms, without adequate aiding support, students cannot receive the attention they need to become successful learners. This impact's the student's confidence and success and also causes stress to staff who feel stretched beyond what they can humanly deliver in their classroom, including their concern that students who they would like to accelerate with their learning also 'miss out' as they simply cannot devote sufficient time to them either. A common

lament is that a teacher is left 'teaching to the middle' not because they want to but because the reality of busy classrooms, without adequate SLSO support, leaves them with little option..

- iv) Perhaps if staffing was not so tight, there would be the opportunity/option to create an additional, smaller class for students within a year group who struggle with their learning, but that is not the case at present and so staff do the best they can and plan lessons around when aiding support will be available.

Thank you for considering the matters which I have outlined above.

Yours faithfully,

Mary Doolan  
Deputy Principal  
Coonabarabran High School