

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

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

I am currently employed as a School Psychologist for the NSW Department of Education. The points I raise in my submission are based on my experience as a School Psychologist and from working with schools previously as a Psychologist specialising in the disability sector, both government and non-government. I would like to address the following sections of the disability inquiry: A) Equitable access to resources for students with a disability or special needs in regional and metropolitan areas; D) Complaint and review mechanisms within the school systems in New South Wales for parents and carers; E) Any other related matters

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

From my experience, students with a disability or special needs in regional and metropolitan areas do not experience an equitable access to resources. The real cost of care supporting an individual with a disability to develop and maintain educational and adaptive functioning skills is high. To obtain the appropriate level of support for an individual student a school needs to complete an Access Request form. There are challenges with this process and the most significant are how time intensive the process is and the criteria set for a student to be successful for funding support.

The process of completing an Access Request is time intensive. Schools need to pursue reports from specialists and school counsellors/psychologists need to complete assessments and reports to guide recommendations. This is quite a process for an application that may not attract any funding.

Students considered for an Access Request need to have significant needs in ten areas of school adaptive functioning. The areas include: Curriculum; Communication (subheadings: Receptive Language and Expressive Language); Participation (subheadings: Social Competence, Safety); Personal Care (subheadings: Hygiene, Eating and Dietary; Health Care Procedures); Movement (subheadings: Mobility and Positioning, Hand Motor Skills). The criteria for each of these domains is in my opinion unattainable for most students who genuinely need support. It appears that a student's functional skills need to be like a child with a moderate intellectual disability to be considered as requiring additional funding. Children who have learning difficulties stemming from trauma and abuse (for example, are in out of home care, fleeing domestic violence) and have a disability are unlikely to be successful. Yet, these are students who have significant potential and a real chance for education to steer them away from a life of welfare dependency and engagement with the justice system. I have seen too many students in exactly this situation who have significant learning challenges that are undiagnosed because their families or circumstances have not provided opportunities for assessment.

Students with disability currently on funding support should have a personalised learning plan. From my experience, they are created without a comprehensive assessment and without the use of outcome measures to measure their effectiveness. Unfortunately, although we have personalised learning plans. This is not an indication that equitable access to resources is being provided for students with a disability. I believe a better sign that students with disability have equitable access to resources is the total eradication of time out rooms whereby the student is placed in an empty room or gated area alone for an unknown period. The presence of alternative

and augmentative communication (AAC) systems and comprehensive positive behaviour support plans created by a disability specialists are necessary if there is a real commitment of engaging these students.

As a School Psychologist, it is my job to assess student needs and to recommend strategies that will enhance school engagement and access to the curriculum. I have the pleasure of working alongside committed teachers. It is my understanding that teachers need ongoing training on a wide variety of disabilities and they learn best when the training is related to the student/s they are currently teaching. Historically disability services would provide extensive training to school staff. the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) means therapists are not coming in to share their expertise and provide staff training free of charge as they had in the past. This is a significant loss for the education sector, where this expertise is not readily accessible.

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

Parents and carers of students with a disability commonly experience significant stress in their daily lives, that is above and beyond what a typical Australian family would experience. This is because they are vulnerable to behavioural and emotional challenges expressed by their child with disability, financial pressures following the cost of therapy and specialised equipment (even with the introduction of NDIS), reduced earning capacity because of the demands of caring and higher risk for parental and siblings' emotional health difficulties, to name a few.

To establish meaningful relationships with families in this predicament, schools need to ensure balanced communication (that also includes positive feedback) is frequently provided either face-to-face or in written form. It means additional meetings and communication with all stakeholders involved in the child's care such as government and non-government organisations. It commonly requires networking families to external support services.

Although schools try their best, the higher incidence of children now presenting with a behavioural, learning or emotional condition make it an impossible task. Sadly, contact with parents commences in a fashion that is not typically positive because resources are allocated to children with the most significant externalising behaviours, which impact the group. Children who disengage from learning in a passive manner are often missed and do not receive the education they deserve.

E. Any other related matters

I would like to see an increase in the number of allocated days school counsellors/psychologists are in schools that is regarded as a minimum for adequate emotional and academic support for students with a disability.

Currently we have seen increased funds that have expanded the school counselling services through the Wellbeing framework. This has been most welcomed. Unfortunately, there have been significant changes to the school counsellor allocation within schools. The current trend is for the size of the school to largely dictate how many days they are allocated a school

counsellor/psychologist. Smaller schools with an inclusion policy of incorporating children with disabilities and those with support units are most disadvantaged by this. Most small schools in my service area have a school counsellor/psychologist ½ day to 1 ¼ day per week (school with three support units). As a school psychologist, there is very little one can do within this allocation. Most of my work is consulting to the executive team providing psychological advice, responding to students at risk of harm or have been suspended for behaviours of concern. Assessments and recommendations for curriculum access is becoming increasingly challenging to complete in a timely manner due to the high needs of students presenting with poor social skills and language deficits. This is further complicated by the fact that children with significant disability such as autism, cerebral palsy or intellectual disability are increasingly enrolling in smaller schools. Anecdotally, families and therapists commonly report they believe smaller schools provide a safer environment for children with disability.

Without an adequate school counselling service, it is impossible for schools to provide adequate and timely access to support. School Counsellors offer assessments that identify educational and emotional barriers to learning. Early identification of the child's strengths and weaknesses from a psychological assessment informs schools on targeted supports and adjustments required to engage student participation and learning.

Due to the small numbers within the counselling service, children who require assessments but who would not meet criteria for integration funding miss out. This is problematic as we are learning that parents often can't afford private assessments especially in Sydney. Wait lists for community services are long and the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme means disability services is no longer an option in obtaining assessments free of charge.

I appreciate the opportunity to provide information about how we can further support our students with disability in public education.