

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

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Introduction

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”

Quote by: Nelson Mandela.

To whom it may concern,

Thank you for allowing us the opportunity, to put in a personal submission to the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into the “Provision of Education to Students with a Disability or Special Needs in Government and Non Government schools in New South Wales”.

I am writing to the inquiry because I believe that my child was denied an equal and fair opportunity at receiving an education. My child had a number of needs that he needed support with so that he could access an education and these needs come from having Autism Spectrum Disorder, AD/HD inattentive, Sensory issues, delayed processing, severe generalised anxiety disorder and now PTSD (from his experiences from mainstream school).

I feel that my son’s needs were not adequately met and supported during his time in mainstream. There were a number of revolving issues around a lack of transparency, accountability and the constant moving of the goal posts by the school and the department so that we never really got anywhere when it came to adequate support systems for my son in mainstream. While the school considered that he had initially had issues prior to a diagnosis they denied him assistance and then when he got diagnosed the department didn’t think that his needs were a top priority simply because he didn’t have the matching behaviours that they required from him, in order to tick boxes to gain that necessary assistance.

On top of this my child was horrendously bullied, tormented and targeted by both teachers and peers at school. He was constantly belittled, which made him feel so insignificant to the

point he was considerably stripped of all of his confidence and self esteem almost breaking his spirit.

The years of torment and being left to his own devices ended in my son wanting to kill himself rather than go back to school for another day. My son became so desperate that I had to physically restrain him in order to calm him down, because he was self harming by scratching his torso over and over again until it bled. Up until that point, I believe that I had done everything within my power in order to give my son an opportunity at receiving a good education, but the system wouldn't allow it. I was then left with no choice but to demand Distance Education for my son, in order to protect himself and get him out of the toxic environment of mainstream school.

I need to make it clear that despite everything we have been through, we have never received any apology, acknowledgement or validation from the Department of Education or the schools in relation to what happened to my son or my family or for what we have had to endure. We have also not been given any compensation for the lack of assistance and undue stress that was put on to our family or have had any common decency extended to us from the Department.

Right now I cannot begin to tell you just how incredibly angry I am, that we are all now needing to take even more time out of our lives, just to put in inquiry submissions so that we can be heard, in the hope that it will help make a difference to other people in the future. As great as this opportunity is, it shouldn't have had to come to this in order for the system to change.

I am aware that our experiences are not an isolated incident and there are a lot of people out there that desperately need and want change. From our experiences, the Department are not being made accountable and lack some serious transparency while seemingly coming across

as though they really don't care about what happens to people. Please take this opportunity to make as much change as possible because from a personal perspective the end cost is just too great.

Our Personal Story

My son's torment with mainstream education begun on day one of kindergarten which was February 2007, (before a diagnosis) when his teacher that had only just met him that very day, yelled at him for not being able to write his name and it continued on until I pulled him out of mainstream at the end of in year five in 2012 which was two years after a diagnosis. In that time my son was constantly overlooked, not seen as a priority, berated, yelled at, picked on, bullied, made to feel like he was stupid, dumb, second rate and not good enough as a person. In his first school my son was not only yelled at by his kindergarten teacher but also berated and yelled at and intimidated by another teacher who was put in charge of reading recovery groups. My son was supposed to be building confidence and catching up in his reading but instead was left feeling scared and stressed about learning to read and making mistakes in case he got yelled at again. My son felt so horrible about the whole situation that when he ended up getting to a point of being able to leave reading recovery groups he was afraid for his peers that were still being made to participate in it. On one occasion this same teacher told my son that "they needed to get him smart" in preparation for the transition into his second school in year one. Now I am not sure why the teacher felt it was necessary to say such a thing to my child, but it was highly inappropriate and made my child feel like he was dumb and it highlights her lack of professionalism or consideration for a child's confidence levels and self esteem. At that very same school, my son and other students were forced to take off their jumpers in the middle of winter for a school photo only to then be told that they were not allowed to put them back on afterwards. My child then ended up coming home with blue looking skin because the temperature here was lucky to be three degrees Celsius. I

remember when I asked my son as to why he wasn't wearing his jumper, he told me that the teacher had said no to him and the other kids going to their bags to get their jumpers back on after the photo because it would take up too much time.

On top of all of the issues that my son dealt with, I also came across a lot of ignorance and a huge lack of accountability from people in charge of the school and the people in the office of the Department of Education whilst trying to advocate for my son. For example, I had a meeting where one relieving principal told me that I should be "grateful for what my son was getting because it was more than he was entitled to", and this happened right in front of Department of Education representatives, who didn't even blink an eye lid at what I felt was a very inappropriate comment to make and then continued to sit there and back him up. To put it into context, the relieving principal was referring to the very limited funding my son was getting, that only allowed him two hours of aide time per week.

We went to professionals and asked them for some advice and support for behaviour management to address my son's behaviour. I felt it was not my place to tell teachers how to do their job but despite my attempts to work with the school I felt the support and expertise were not forthcoming. This cycle brought me to tears as I felt frustrated, upset and at a complete loss as to what I was supposed to do to help my son in school when no one would listen to me. To add to this, I also had teachers telling me that my son was "misinterpreting" the bullying incidences that I had reported and another instance where one teacher allegedly told my son that he would get "nevers" on his report card, which instantly made him feel as though he had done something wrong and he would be getting a bad report card.

My son is kid who always tries his absolute hardest with his schooling and rarely got into trouble, because of this conversation it caused him to have an absolute meltdown so bad that his behaviour went completely off the charts that afternoon! My son was in absolute hysterics

when he got home because even before he left school he had internalised the thought that he had done something terribly wrong and he would get into trouble for it. Under no circumstances had my son ever been afraid of bringing home his report card and showing it to me, because as a parent I always encouraged him and rewarded his efforts for trying at school no matter the grades he had received and he would have normally been excited to give it to me in anticipation for his reward. Yet this teacher's comment whatever it was that she said to him, had made him feel like he would get a horrible report card that was completely unjustified! After that incident, I then attempted to find out exactly what had been said to my son, but the teacher I ended up speaking to about it, told me that she would talk to the other teacher who had allegedly said this and find out what happened. The following day I got a response from the teacher who said that the other teacher had completely denied that the conversation had ever taken place and again he had either "misinterpreted it" or he had overheard another conversation that was not meant for him to hear. This may not sound a very big deal to some, but the teacher in question clearly was not trained in how to communicate effectively with kids who are on the spectrum and did not realise the impact of how you speak can impact on them so significantly.

I also had instances where my son would come home in meltdown mode because something had happened at school that day, only to for me contact the school and have teachers tell me that they had no idea what I was talking about and they believed that my son had no reason to be upset because as far as they were aware nothing had happened!

To make it even worse, on a number of different occasions when I was approaching the school and the department of education, I was made to feel like I was the crazy lady, the overbearing parent, the parent that had issues, the parent that just wouldn't go away, the parent that was a pain to deal with, the one that supposedly had bonding issues with my own child, and overall the parent to avoid. I got these feelings by the way I was spoken too, the body

language, facial expressions and their general disrespectful and patronising way in which I was treated on occasion. I also believe that some staff were clearly trying to avoid my calls and or running in the opposite direction the moment they caught sight of me up at the school because my calls would not be returned in a timely matter or I had to physically go up to the school in order to get matters addressed.

There were also times where I was made to feel intimidated by the Department of Education and the staff at the school because I would turn up for a meeting to be left out in the office foyer for five to ten minutes whilst the principal and others attending the meeting, were in the room together having a chat before it begun and then when I was eventually called into the room, they had the chairs set up in a semi circle and I was made to walk across the circle to the only seat that was available on the far side of the room while everyone remained seated and had their eyes upon me as I walked in, followed by a hostile type greeting from the relieving principal.

There was one incident that I need to mention where my son was left to his own devices and inadequately supervised for eight weeks in the school library, where he was supposed to be completing a spider project in that time, but instead ended up coming home in absolute tears on the Friday afternoon before the project was due. My son told me that he had not done the project, didn't know what he was supposed to have done with it and didn't know what he was going to do come the following Monday when he was supposed to hand something in. As soon as I found out I went back into the school and found the teacher and asked her what he was talking about, only to discover that even the teacher didn't know that my son had not been doing his work as she left the librarian in charge of the class to do some research for those eight weeks and she had not been properly supervising and ensuring that the kids were and he only had one piece of paper with a picture of a spider and a sentence that read "a spider has eight legs" on it, to show for the eight weeks of work that he was supposed to have

done. After speaking to my son later, he informed me that he had thrown the guide sheet in the bin at the end of the first week, because no one had told him that he needed to use it and what it was for. So as you can imagine that on that particular weekend I ended up having to sit down with him myself in order to play catch up and complete the eight weeks worth of school work just so that he could have something to hand in on that following Monday.

I also have reason to believe that teachers at both schools had considerably lowered expectations of my child and viewed my son's capabilities and intelligence level at a much lower level than his neurotypical peers. This was shown through the constant bad attitudes and the amount of discrimination and flat out ignorance that we both endured during his mainstream experience. One prime example of this comes from my son's first Naplan experience in year three. At that time I was not made aware that it was optional for kids with disabilities, nor was I made aware that I could take my son out if I chose too. From my understanding, in the lead up to that particular group of Naplan exams, my son was specifically taken out of normal classes and put into a group with a few other kids at least two days a week for an hour or so because they were needing to prep the kids as best they could for Naplan so that the school could get the best results possible. At first I thought that they may have had my sons best interest at heart however when the results came back from the exam I got a very unexpected and overly excited phone call from one of the disability officers in the school, to tell me that my son had done so exceptionally well in a couple of his exams that he exceeded the national average. I immediately felt insulted and a little offended by this phone call because it demonstrated to me that they had no faith in my son's abilities and did not even think he was smart enough to even pass an exam. They made such a huge deal about it that one of the staff members even went to my son's classroom to congratulate him and make a big deal about it in the middle of class time, which made him feel like they had completely under estimated his intelligence and thought he was not capable of achieving such

high marks. What made it worse is that I felt like I was the only one that knew that my son was capable of achieving high marks and I was the only one that wasn't surprised by the results that he received.

It seemed to me that his teachers had such low expectations of my son that they were shocked that he did so well. Due to this experience, I will now no longer allow ANY of my kids to participate in Naplan exams, and I will continue to take them out of each one because I refuse to have any of my kids made to feel like that ever again. From my experience, I now think that Naplan is an unnecessary waste of time and too much emphasis is put on the kids doing well in the exams just so that the schools can satisfy the governments need to collect data and potentially avoid the government using it against them if their students don't do so well. Also, Naplan allows teachers to categorise and have pre conceived notions about a child's ability and intelligence because in order to get the best results, teachers must identify the problematic students and/or the students they think are not good enough to do well in the exams and they can either put them into prep groups like they did with my son or exclude them entirely from the exams so that those students are not able bring their results down. In other words, Naplan results should be taken with a grain of salt because the individual schools can help to manipulate the end results in order to achieve the highest results possible to satisfy the government. To add to this I cannot tell you how many conversations I have had with teachers about Naplan not being for the benefit of students and how schools are pressured to make sure they do well in the exams despite the fact that the results only show a very small snap shot of where a student is suppose to be up to and how well they are doing. In my son's case, my son's report cards were not at all reflective of his Naplan results and did not match up with his actual progress at school.

Another incident that I would also like to highlight when it comes to showing complete ignorance and complete disregard for children with disabilities is the time I approached the

school principal in the February/ March of 2012 about the idea that kids like my son were always missing out on any recognition from the school for their hard work. I felt that every year the kids with special needs like my son would be left just watching everyone else get awards etc when they themselves would have to try harder than most kids in order to do well at school. So I plucked up the courage to approach the principal about it telling him my thoughts on the issue and letting him know that perhaps they should give the kids with disabilities and special needs a lot more recognition either during the year or by giving them a certificate of encouragement for continuing to have a go, at the end of year presentation day. You know what he told me, okay come back and see me in term four about it all and rushed me out of the office like it was too much to ask and he wasn't interested in having a conversation about it. Along came term four it turned out he was already overseas having his holiday which I was informed he left for in term three.

That same principal also asked me if I was "sure I wanted to label my child by placing him in a support unit because other parents had been reluctant to place their kids into support units because their kids would be labelled", my reply: I was willing to do whatever it takes to help my child get a good education and I wasn't worried about the label that may or may not come with that. In other words, what the principal was really asking me was, if I was sure that I wanted to publicly declare that my son has Autism because this is what putting him into a support unit meant.

Another example of this ignorance and lack of care for my son was a phone call that I received when my child was in year four from his class teacher, who was puzzled as to why my son hadn't yet received his gold award by that stage. At that particular school, students had to earn a number of merit awards so that they could get a bronze award, then more merits to get a silver award and so forth right up to a banner level after gold. Now in order to get these merits my child had to meet certain behaviour requirements and obey the school rules

and do the right thing so that he could be rewarded with a merit. For all intensive purposes, I had no reason to believe that my son had no reason to not gain merit awards at school because he was a quiet kid that always tried his best and didn't get into trouble very often, even despite him struggling in class and trying to maintain his focus so that he could complete his school work. The merits he got were so few and far between that when the teacher asked me if he had gotten his gold award, all I could do was laugh at her and tell her that my son has hardly even had merits given to him let alone being able to get enough to get a gold award. What was done about it? Absolutely nothing, the teacher was initially confused and asked me if I was sure that he hadn't received it and I said yep and told her to check the records if she didn't believe me. Turns out I was right and NO that gold awards and merits needed to earn that award never came, no matter how hard my son tried or how well he did in school. His efforts would never be recognised until he began Distance Education.

There was also an incident during one of my sons Individual Education Plan meetings, where I highlighted the issues of bullying to the staff members that attended and I ended up suggesting that perhaps some programs on Autism awareness or activities that could take place within the school so that other students school could learn about Autism and bring more awareness to accepting kids that are different through education and reduce instances of bullying that were rampant in the school. Nothing ever came of it. The school even didn't care in the slightest. In another I.E.P meeting I turned up wearing blue in support of Autism Awareness Day / Month on April 2nd, which occurs every year and I commented on another staff member wearing blue given the significance of the day and not one staff member even had a clue about Autism Awareness Day / Autism Awareness Month in April. I just got blank stares as though I was a complete idiot.

The lack of funding and resources was also a huge problem for my son when he was in mainstream school. Due to an extensive amount of red tape, waiting lists, and incompetent

professionals, my son wasn't able to be diagnosed with "high functioning" Autism, (which used to be called Aspergers Syndrome), until midway through year three. It is important to add that before my sons diagnosis I did ask the schools, if my son could please receive some assistance in the classroom after I was made aware by certain teachers that they had identified some learning difficulties and he needed assistance, but I was told no and he needed some sort of diagnosis in order to get any extra help from aides or the school in general. So in that time frame from kinder to mid way year three my son was left to his own devices and left to fall behind without so much as a thought for how it would impact on him in the future even though it was identified that my son had needs. Once my son had received his diagnosis of Aspergers in mid 2010, he ended up only qualifying for minimal amounts of funding help and had to just make do with what he had because he was classified as 'high functioning' despite numerous reports done over the years by the school counsellors to say that my son was suffering from severe levels of anxiety and depression and teachers telling me he was struggling to even finish his work in the classroom.

Once the diagnosis of Aspergers syndrome was given, I was regularly involved in attending annual IEP meetings at my son's school and often discussed the issues of limited funding and resources that my son was getting access to. I was always reminded that according to the rigid guidelines, he was only "entitled" to get what he had been given and we had to make do. Time and time again my appeals for extra funding were denied on the grounds that the wording on my child's diagnosis was not in line with the new guidelines that came out stating that kids needed to have the words "Autism Spectrum Disorder" on their diagnosis paperwork and I was told by a Department of Education person that I needed to go and get him "re-diagnosed" so that his paperwork was put in line with the departments new policies due to the change over in the DSM4 where Aspergers was no longer recognised and therefore funding was no longer going to be available. During a phone conversation with a

Departmental staff member toward the very end of my son's mainstream experience, I was also told that my appeals for funding were denied simply because the Department of Education had allegedly labelled him a "good child" on the departmental files and therefore would not receive any extra assistance once he entered high school.

Things got so desperate for funding that in a face to face meeting a school principal told me, "off the record" that he would recommend that I work my son up before he got to the school gates in the morning in the hope that he would misbehave and cause issues so that they could record it and put it toward a case for more funding. I never did take that recommendation because a.) It was completely inappropriate and b.) my son was terrified of mucking up or misbehaving at school and he would regularly hold in all of his emotions and frustrations at school until he got home or even just until he made it to the car of an afternoon, before he would then explode like a volcano and doing that before he got to school would have made a really bad afternoon into a much worse one. I feel that this behaviour stemmed from his initial school experiences in kindergarten and year one at the first school he attended where he was verbally abused for pretty much everything that the teachers weren't happy about.

To make matters much, much worse for us, new funding policies were announced at the end of 2011 called "The Every Student, Every school Initiative", that took away my sons pittance amount of individual funding because his individual amount was way under the \$6,000 threshold that was expected in order to maintain funding. Due to this change my son went from a very little amount of funding, which from memory was around \$2,500 to absolutely nothing! I was then told by the department and the school that my son now had to share from a limited bucket of funding that was going to be given by the government, for all of the kids at the school that needed extra help but did not qualify for any individual funding. I need you all to know, that single change in the government's funding policy absolutely devastated us as we were then left with having to fight for whatever crumbs the principal could throw our

way which also made him have to compete against kids that didn't have a diagnosis. This made me feel as though jumping through hoops just to get the diagnosis in the first place was a complete and utter waste of time.

As it turned out, that specific moment also marked the beginning of the end to my son's mainstream education because around the same time, it just so happened that my son was also being bullied and tormented horrendously by his peers at school and I was already up to my head in tasks to do which included trying to constantly chase teachers up and get issues sorted out while my son's mental health continued to deteriorate.

To top it off my son became so desperate for extra assistance in the classroom that his behaviours at home started escalating and his frustration levels went through the roof due to feeling like he was falling further and further behind, despite having a real interest in learning and wanting to do his best at school and it was then that I was nearing my own breaking point and felt like I had no one to turn to for help and no idea as to what we were going to do.

By absolute chance just through talking to others about our situation, I just happened to find out from a third party that my son could qualify for some extra funding on the grounds that my son was diagnosed with mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, so I applied for that funding through the school hoping it would be at least something significant but my son was only granted a one off payment of \$500 that would only allow my son one single term worth of aide time in a class where he needed it most.

By the following year, we were left begging for crumbs from the school in order to get my son what he needed. Time and time again, we were just going around and around on a funding merry go round that ended up leading us to nowhere while the bullying was still escalating and particular teachers were only making it worse through their attitudes.

By this stage my child was always coming home and complaining that teachers would fail to listen to him and act upon the bullying by the other kids. My son noticed how quickly they seemed to change their attitudes once I took myself up to the school and spoke to them face to face. The bullying wasn't just limited to physically pushing and shoving either, in fact my son was also reporting to me that there were children bringing in home made weapons at school in their bags e.g. sling shots, pea shooters etc and using them on him and other students while they were at school. Often kids would also just steal items out of my child's pencil case or other people's pencil cases and turn them into weapons before using others for target practice. My son also reported kids hitting, kicking, pushing, shoving, intimidating and isolating him in the playground while also passing him very explicit, vile and extremely crude notes full of cursive and derogatory words inside the classroom while the teacher was present. I personally witnessed three notes that my son was given in class by another child that was well known for being a bully and I was mortified at what the kid had written on the notes. I remember one note referred to my son a crude name for a woman's genital area and another one called my son a faggot and dropped the C word and other words such the F bomb, B word, M.F word etc, which are all really confronting and highly insulting.

The child in question, even had the nerve to confront and try to intimidate my son for dobbing him in for his behaviour as the child thought that he had done nothing wrong and it was my sons fault that he was in trouble. The teachers response was she had no idea such notes were being passed around and she thought it was all just innocent drawings and messages so she didn't bother looking and checking on any of the kids that were doing it. Other incidences including the teachers confiscating items and throwing them into the classroom bin and then when the teacher had left the room the kids would just go and collect the items again without the teacher's knowledge and it wasn't until I alerted the teacher to the issue that they started to take the items and dispose of them elsewhere in the school. The

bullying became so bad, that at one point my son couldn't even take a simple handball to school without the bullies intentionally throwing them up onto the roof, snatching them off of him, taking them from his bag or his classroom tub and or laying claim to them just because they could. In the end, my son ended up being regularly excluded from playground activities with the other kids and was left to wander the playground on his own because the other kids would often refuse to allow him to play with them.

By the time all was said and done and my son started Distance Education, I discovered with the help of the teachers that he was not only suffering mentally and emotionally from the torment of mainstream but he was also years behind in his learning. My son ended up needing to have alternate learning programs made up for him for the first three years of Distance Education in order to fill in the learning gaps that he had simply because he was so far behind. My son was missing a lot of the basics that he wasn't taught in the early years of primary school, which I believe was due to him being denied any assistance in the years prior to his diagnosis from kindergarten to year three 2007 – mid 2010, that I mentioned earlier.

I also have reason to believe that the report cards that I had received for my child prior to him leaving mainstream, were not at all accurate and may have been falsified as they did not match up to where he was actually at. I remember his year six teacher for distance education ringing me up in the first two weeks to query the report card as it was not matching up with where she had assessed my son to be at in his learning.

I need to mention too that my son was almost onto his third school before I had no other choice but to pull him out and put him into Distance Education and I also need to make it clear that I found out about Distance Education through a third party who had nothing to do with the schools or the Department of Education. I was never ever informed of any other alternative programs available to educate my son prior to the third party making me aware of

it. I feel that all parents should be given information on Homeschooling and Distance Education programs as I believe that everyone should have a right to choose how their children complete their education.

One major issue that I have also discovered since my son starting Distance Education is the amount of gate keeping that goes on with the Department of Education here in NSW, when it came to having to “approve” applications for kids to be allowed into Distance Education despite it being for very valid reasons. In my emails to the Department of Education, after my son had become suicidal and was self harming, I told them that my son was never going back to mainstream school and I wanted approval for Distance Education immediately. Their reply was, they said that a panel of complete strangers, would have to approve my son’s application into the program and I would have to await their decision. My reply: NO, NO, NO! My son had been pushed to the absolute brink and my family was falling apart at the seams because of the constant drama of the mainstream system, I had a four month old baby at the time that wasn’t sleeping and I was trying to keep my milk supply up because stress was starting to impact it and here they were trying to tell me that five or six strangers were going to be able to decide my sons fate and my family’s future because they had to “approve” his application. I think NOT! If a parent wants to take their kids out of mainstream education and place them into Distance Education or Home-school who are you to say yes or no to that? As parents we should not have to justify our decision to anyone. Why is it that in other states like Victoria, Queensland & South Australia, there is no jumping through unnecessary hoops in order to take your child out of mainstream and enrol them into Distance Education? Parents should NOT need any approval by the Department of Education in NSW or anyone else, as parents should have the right to decide what is best for our child’s education instead of having it decided for us by a bunch of incompetent pen pushers.

To add to this, I have spoken to numerous families across NSW that have had the fight of their lives in order to try to access Distance Education for their kids, who just happen to have special needs or other issues that prevent them from getting a good education in mainstream. A lot of them now find themselves in the home-schooling program with very little supports and access to resources because of the Department of Education's gatekeepers. I have also had other people tell me that they took months to be approved for the program and only after a fierce fight with the department to get the approval, while other people have had to jump regions or states just to get access to Distance Education because their child could not be properly catered to in mainstream and they were denied access to the local program that would have suited their child/ren. Tell me how is that fair? I also don't know if you are aware, but there are also families here in NSW that having to travel vast distances daily to get their child into a school where their kids can be looked after and some of these parents have to spend a fortune on fuel and travel costs because their nearest schools have either prevented their children from enrolling or they cannot be catered to sufficiently.

Why should any parent have to go to such lengths to give their kids a good education, so that their children can have a future? Education is a Human Right and here in NSW the Department of Education and a lot of schools are failing to provide that human right because kids don't fit the mould and their parents are forced to jump through ridiculous hoops and cut through red tape, just so that their child can have a decent education that caters to their needs and abilities. It's an absolute disgrace!!! I even had one Departmental person over the phone ask me if I realised that Distance Education was going to be hard. My reply: How is that your problem? My sons safety and well being was absolutely paramount to me and here I was being questioned about whether or not I realised it would be a hard thing to do for my child as though I had actually been left with any other choice!! Needless to say I had the papers signed and ready to allow him into Distance Education on the fifth day from my first request.

Interesting enough after being shut down and denied assistance for my child every which way for years by the Department and the schools, I received a phone call from someone in the Department offering my son an eleventh hour placement in the special needs unit that was due to open up the following year at the same school that had just pushed him to the brink of suicide and self harming. This was instead of him going to the third school where I wanted him to be placed so that he could make a fresh start, well away from all the bullies and the horrible teachers that had all but destroyed him. My answer: NO, I wanted Distance Education. I then spoke with my sons psychologist not long after that had occurred and even they said "what parent in their right mind would allow their child to go back into a school that had just caused him so much grief?" They found it humorous that despite everything that had happened, that was all that the Department of Education could come up with and they agreed with me that I had made the right decision.

The impact that this has had on our family

In order for my son to finish his schooling and have a future I am now having to be a full time carer with very limited supports and respite opportunities. This whole situation, has also taken away any chance of me being able to earn a second income for my family until my son graduates, which would help to provide us with a much better standard of living and we are entirely reliant on my husband's low paying job and any Centrelink benefits we can get in order to pay the bills. Now given the amount of cost cutting that has gone on, no thanks to the Federal Government here in Australia, life is feeling very uncertain for us a lot of the time especially since the cost of living is continuing to increase. The school kid's bonus that got the axe last year has also now impacted on us significantly and with the threat of a welfare card being rolled out so that we will be told how and where we can spend our money is going to add to our already stretched house hold budget and add insult to injury. What makes me most upset is that my son is saving the state government thousands of dollars a year by not

attending mainstream school and our family is now at the absolute mercy of the Australian State and Federal governments due to being stuck in a situation that was not of our choosing. As a family we continue to face increasing pressures of just trying and keep a roof over our heads. I have no support other than what the distance education school can provide and the Education Department and the schools that did this to us have made no apology or formal acknowledgement or anything. Pretty low act don't you think?

The very little respite that we get costs a fortune and the NDIS scheme is not going to be rolled out where we are until later in this year and by the looks of things even if it gets rolled out, we may not qualify for very much at all. By the time my son graduates it will have been seven years out of the workforce for me and seven years without being able to put any money into my superannuation account which will cost me later in life, if I am unable to make up for it before I am due to retire. I also get no salary, no sick leave, no annual leave, no holiday pay and certainly very little opportunities to even be able to afford a holiday for myself and our family. On top of this, although Distance Education provides a great deal of assistance and support to my child in order to be able to receive an education, it is difficult for him to be able to access any educational based camps and social gatherings through the school of Distance Education that he is enrolled in, because we financially struggle to make ends meet on a weekly basis and we also find it difficult to attend due to time restraints and having no family assistance or help with our other two children, while my husband is also needing to work, so making day trips or overnight trips is extremely difficult to organise. Having a limited social interaction with peers and teachers at distance education adds to the feeling of isolation within the program and gives him no opportunity to make friends on a school level. Currently my son has no friends and he cannot even find anyone to help him celebrate his sixteenth birthday coming up later this year and it concerns me greatly because he is entering that transition phase in his life where teens start to explore their relationships with the

opposite/same sex, which is significant in developing their own sexual identity as well as exploring their own self identification and where they fit into the social realm of society, and let's also not forget how valuable it is to have friends, as it helps to contribute to your sense of self worth and self esteem. Apart from myself and our family, my child is alone and it is extremely difficult for him to socialise when no one seems to understand or take the time to get to know him. Given we have such circumstances in our lives my son struggles to explain to people why he is in Distance Education and we are finding that there is a stigma attached to home education. I also became a social leper at one point because I have had to do this for my child and even now I find it extremely difficult to find people that understand me and our situation. I have had to rebuild my social circles and be aware of who I let into our lives as there are a lot of very judgemental and ignorant people out there and to make it worse it is much harder for my son to form and maintain friendships due to his disabilities especially since he doesn't attend a local school like every-one else.

By the time that my son had been taken out of school in November of 2012, our lives were completely messed up. I had a relatively new baby that I was still trying to breastfeed, was lacking sleep, we were all extremely stressed out, my husband and I were on the brink of a relationship break up, we had a suicidal/self harming child on our hands that wasn't coping at all, my grandfather had just died in the September and due to everything else that was happening, I could not attend his funeral and therefore it impacted negatively on my other family relationships. Due to my stress levels, I could not even bring myself to explain to others in my family what had been happening for us and why I couldn't attend. I had no time to grieve for my loss and the amount of stress that I was placed under, and this seriously impacted on my ability to make clear decisions. As soon as I had pulled my son out from school, I requested that my son get some work sent home so that he could finish the term at home but instead the Department of Education yet again sent me the message that my sons

education was not of value to them because they conveniently granted him “mental health leave” for the remainder of the year which I did not ask for. Given the circumstances one could think well the Department were just trying to help but to me it seemed as though they didn’t care about my son.

The following months of taking my son out of school were extremely difficult. After my son self harmed and became suicidal I immediately contacted his psychologist, paediatrician and the mental health team from the local hospital about what had happened and took my son up to the mental health clinic to be assessed. Unfortunately we could not get someone from the Children’s Mental Health Team to see my son as they were not available at the time so he had to be seen to by someone from the Adults Mental Health Team who wasn’t the best in dealing with a self harming/ suicidal child. At the time of the appointment my son was still highly distressed and overly anxious and was unable to fully verbalise how he was feeling to the worker. My son’s paediatrician and psychologist who I spoke to over the phone due to not being able to see them at such short notice, agreed that my son could not go back to mainstream and that distance education was the only option. I was also told by the psychologist that being approved for Distance Education could take several **months** due to the amount of paperwork and gate-keeping that the Department does in regards to allowing kids into the program. On top of having to get my son out of mainstream education, I also had to navigate the serious issue of helping my son to de-stress and come down from his extreme bout of anxiety that created the self harming and wanting to commit suicide in order to help him to feel safe again. Bottom line was, our family’s trust in the schools and the department had been completely shattered and we now were left to pick up the pieces and start over as best we could. My son was so upset that he kept wondering why it had to be him leaving the school and not the people that had caused this grief for him and our family. The best way that I could describe the feeling he had, was he was a piece of disposable garbage that had no

value in the system or in the schools eyes and was merely just tossed out because he was too hard to help. My child kept asking why this happened and why he now had to do Distance Ed in order to receive an education. How do you as a parent, tell your child that what happened to them wasn't their fault and they shouldn't blame themselves as it was ultimately the inadequate system that set them up to fail? As you can imagine I spent the following months going into damage control in our house while also trying to keep my relationship with my husband together and being a mum to our other children with Christmas thrown in for good measure. Although there was a decrease in anxiety in my son he was still very upset and traumatised from his experiences.

Also to let you know just how much this experience has impacted me, the day that my second child started school was one of the hardest days of my life. You cannot begin to imagine how hard it was for me to have to walk my second child into another set of school gates, after what had just transpired for us only three short months prior to that, in the hope that everything would be okay this time around. It was psychologically and emotionally tormenting to the point that suicidal thoughts actually entered my head and I was considering just ending it all without mentioning a word to anyone. I was broken, racked with fear and immense guilt and a large amount of powerlessness and uselessness from not being able to protect my own child. I was very upset. From where I was standing, I had absolutely no reason what so ever, to be able to trust anyone in the Department or inside the school and I no longer felt that schools were safe for my children. Usually parents cry happy tears in the moment where your child starts their first day of school but that day, the tears that I cried I assure you were not happy ones. I had barely had time to process what had happened to my eldest child and then all of a sudden I was just expected to trust that it wasn't going to happen to my second son? I was placed in I felt that yet again I was being pushed into another corner because I was unable to just home-school or place him into distance education, because I

knew that I had already had enough on my plate and my eldest would need my absolute full attention, in order to make up for the years of him not being adequately cared for at school. So tell me how being placed into that predicament was fair to me or my family? Imagine that you were me, what would you have done? It took every fibre of my being to get through that day and the following weeks and months of my second son being in school and had it not been for the amazing teacher that he was so blessed with that year, I don't think I would have gotten through the first year of his schooling. The heart ache of having to live through that day and the following months will never leave me. On top of this I also had to navigate the first years of distance education with a child that was so emotionally and mentally traumatised from his time at school, that any memory or reminder of his mainstream experiences would automatically trigger PTSD reactions in him and cause him to have severe emotional meltdowns where he became very anxious and highly distressed, and in the end both of us ended up having nightmares for months and months because we were still both so shaken up over what had happened that it was haunting our sleep. My son was also so traumatised over what happened that he would cry over the most, simple things that reminded him of school like using the computer. According to my son, he always missed out on getting to use a computer because he was always last to finish in the classroom (due to not getting adequate assistance) and only the kids that finished first got to have a go, my son would even cry over spelling words because the teacher made him write out the words that he got wrong fifty times over during break time while the other kids played and the smallest thing like if his brother was being picked on at school, would set him off. Some days it all just got too much. We had to just do "tools down" (which was code for no more school work for the day) and work through whatever emotions we had at the time and try to bring calmness and peace back into the house. There were some days that my son was just beside himself and it made it hard to complete any work at all and we would have to do school work on a Saturday and a

Sunday just to make up for it and believe me there were a lot of those weekends where that happened. It was severely traumatic for both of us and at the same time I was also trying to care for my youngest child who was only a baby at the time.

When my daughter was eighteen months old I had to make the difficult decision to put her in family day care five days a week just so that I could help my son without trying to keep my ever growing and always curious daughter occupied so that we could focus on what needed to be done while she was in a safe environment and doing her own learning and exploration. I am not the type to have to resort to putting my kids in day care let alone that many days a week unless it was absolutely necessary, and that added to the tremendous amount of guilt that I already had over my son being failed by the school system.

To add to this trauma we also got a very surprising and unexpected phone call on my sons very first day of distance education at the beginning of year six, from a departmental person that we had contact with since my son was originally diagnosed and I feel that she was trying to intimidate us and threaten us, about my son being forced back into school if he didn't comply with D.E. We informed my sons teacher at distance education about it immediately and they spoke to people above them in order to ensure that we were not contacted again and if the department wanted to know anything they could go through the teachers in distance education as my son was no longer under their jurisdiction. There was no reason what so ever for this person to call me that day and I feel that they were trying to make us fearful and upset and make it known that they were watching us. I honestly felt the call was unnecessary and its purpose was merely to intimidate us. The reason why I felt that was because she wasn't calling to check on the well being of my son was because she did not once ask how he was going but instead told me that we were now obligated to follow the expectations of D.E. and threatened me indirectly by telling me that if my son failed to complete the work and send it back they would be force him back to school and there would be nothing that we could do

about it. Even when I told this person that she can rest assured that my son would be doing the work and what he was expected of him she was relentless in reminding me that they would be monitoring his progress closely.

Where we are at five years on

Today my son is now in year ten and has caught up on all of his subjects, his anxiety and meltdowns that we had on a daily basis at school are long gone and my son is now thriving. Distance Education has literally saved our lives and although it was our last resort my son is a completely different kid now. I will never excuse the system or forgive the Department or the schools for the grief that they caused us but what I will say is I have proof that my child was never the problem. My son went from never getting award cards at school to now having a folder full to overflowing with award cards that he has diligently earned since he begun Distance Education. My son is also getting really good grades and he is even getting 90-100% in some subjects that he was once doing really poorly in. My son was able to learn to trust teachers again and build up some amazing phone skills that I would never had imagined was even possible due to how broken he was when he left mainstream education. Distance Education has built up his confidence so much that eighteen months into Distance Education my son came to me and told me that he no longer hated maths and felt like it was no longer his worst subject. This brought me to absolute tears of joy when I heard those words because it proved that my decision to put him into distance education was the right thing to do because he had been struggling so much with maths in school and was so far behind that he had lost all confidence in himself and thought he was just stupid. Turns out he became so embarrassed to give answers out loud in maths class at school, because the other kids would often make fun of him, laugh at him and call him some horrible names if he didn't get it right. In all honesty I never thought that I would ever hear the words "I no longer hate maths anymore" come from his mouth because by the time he was out of mainstream, he was so

beaten down and lacking in self confidence that I wasn't sure if he would ever gain back some self confidence and belief in his abilities.

Also my son's confidence levels had increased so much that he was able to begin attending Air Force Cadets at the age of thirteen and is now at proficiency level and is in line for his second promotion this year once he attends a promotion course that he has been nominated to become a Corporal by the squadron leaders after only being a Leading Cadet for a short time. At the age of thirteen my son flew his first glider, as well as operated and calibrated flight simulators while also teaching his peers how to do it. Through Cadets, he has been given leadership responsibilities in terms of being nominated for Duty Cadet several times, which is a supervisory role which entails helping to delegate tasks to other cadets, time manage the squadron and take on other leadership tasks on any particular parade night where he has been nominated by the officers to take on the role. My son's confidence has risen so much that he has also taken on helping to teach lessons to cadets on a lower level to him with the assistance of other leaders. His progress has been going so well that he has recently received awards for being 'The Most Improved Cadet' and given the honour of the "Commanding Officers award for 2016" and on top has also been blitzing all of his aviation, navigation, service knowledge and drill exams in Cadets. Due to these experiences, my son is now also looking into a career into the Australian Defence Force or with an organisation that will allow him to do something with computers and technology in a job such as a computer technician. My son has had more help at home in Distance Education than he had ever received in mainstream school and all of his teachers over the years have been more than helpful and understanding and often been very flexible in his learning outcomes and adjusted his work to suit his abilities and his competency levels.

The lesson to be learned here is that kids with special needs like my son cannot just be expected to fit the mould and tick a box in school, nor can they be expected to just change

themselves just so they can receive sufficient help. Every child has a right to an education, no matter their ability and the department of education and the schools have it all wrong when it comes to helping kids like my son to learn. The system is broken and highly inadequate. The rigid thinking of the system, the teachers and the people running the department is **why** kids are falling through the cracks and being left with very little hope for a future. The system is too rigid and requires children of different levels to fit into specific boxes in order to get a fair and equal education alongside their neurotypical peers. Given the substantial improvement of my child I have grounds to believe that my son was put into the too hard basket by the schools and the department and they just couldn't have been bothered to look after him and give him the educational opportunity that he deserves despite it being his human right.

Given our circumstances, I have also had to find ways in order to ward off depression and extreme anxiety while my son is learning at home because I have felt like I am not contributing to society and I have great concerns for what lies ahead once my son completes his HSC. I cannot tell you how many nights I have been kept awake because of the psychological impact that this situation has had on me and how time after time I just feel like I am expected to just put my big girl panties on and deal with the situation on top of anything else that the government want to dish out to us in regards to any government benefit cut that is the new flavour of the month, despite already being dealt a really bad hand. I have nothing nice to say every time the government decides to cut pensions and carers off at the knees and despite emailing ministers in the past, my pleas have fallen on deaf ears. I have pretty much felt like no one actually cares how they are crippling our family and other families out there that are trying to make up for the broken and highly faulty education system here in Australia.

Lucky for me I am not only defiant and head strong, but I am also determined on getting my son and my family past this in order to use our story to help those in similar circumstances in

the near future. Right now, I am working toward my first degree online (doing it part time due to being committed to my son's schooling) with the intent of completing post grad studies and having a future in writing policy & being an advisor to others. No surprises that my passion will be in education and advocacy for people with disabilities in order to give them a better quality of life and who better to do it than someone like myself who has walked the walk and seen first- hand just how messed up our education system is and just how poorly people with disabilities get treated here in Australia?

I also need to say that my biggest regret is that I **ever** placed my child into the mainstream system and into the hands of the people who run the education system and the schools. I was clearly wrong when it came to trusting them to do the right thing by my child and my family and if I could have my time over again knowing what I know now, I can honestly say that I would have never ever put him into mainstream school at all. I was clearly naive and stupid to think that for one minute our mainstream education system here in NSW would be able to cater to my son's needs, let alone be willing to provide all of the necessary resources and funding so that he could get a great education and ultimately reach his full potential. In hindsight, perhaps there should have been a clause on the department's enrolment forms that I signed, that gave me a fair warning that my son's access to a good education was not going to be guaranteed and would depend on whether or not he ticked the right boxes and or acted up badly in school. I would also like to add that having to retell our story for this inquiry has brought back up a lot of emotions for me and even though I am very sceptical of anything actually coming out of this inquiry. I would hope that some significant recommendations can be made and implemented by the department of education and the schools once the findings of this inquiry have been released but I am not going to hold my breath.

The differences between Distance Education and Mainstream Education

As a part of my submission I think it is really important to spell out the vast differences between Distance Education learning versus mainstream so that you can understand my frustrations. I believe that a lot of the help he has received in Distance Education could have easily been provided for in mainstream but wasn't. I believe that my son could have done very well in school should sufficient provisions have been made for him and he was without all of the bullying and torment that he endured from his peers and teachers.

<u>In Distance Education</u>	<u>In Mainstream Education</u>
Teachers explain everything to my son in ways that he understands while helping him to breakdown the work and learn one step at a time	Teachers couldn't have cared less about explaining things to my son properly or in ways he understood and were happy to leave him to his own devices or staring at four walls
My son does not do exams in Distance Education until the HSC but instead does assessments at the end of term or half yearly which is less stressful for him and works wonders.	My son would have been forced into unnecessary exams in high school which would have made his anxiety a lot worse than what it was and my son would not have coped at all.
Distance Education gives regular praise, acknowledgement and constructive feedback for my child when it comes to areas where my son needs to work on or has been doing well in.	Schools rarely recognised my son's achievements or gave him any praise or constructive feedback and mostly just made him feel criticised. It was an effort for them to make him feel good about anything.
Distance Education provides my son with some resources in order to make his learning easier e.g. a laptop, an A4 sized white board, resource kits, internet programs like Moodle.	Mainstream only provided my son with bare minimum resources and even then I had to fight for each resource and was still given the run around.
Teachers go ABOVE and BEYOND to help my son learn and are approachable, flexible, caring, understanding and friendly.	A lot of the teachers I experienced apart from one or two didn't even try to help my son in ways that I now believe they could have and did the bare minimum for him.
Distance Education provides that one on one support for my child that he clearly needed and without having to compete for attention just so he can understand something or in order get his work done in a timely manner	Mainstream education left my son having to compete against other kids in order to get things explained properly or for him to try and get some extra help which was difficult for him. I believe aide teachers would have been great for this but again he was given very little to no time with one.
My son now learns in a non toxic and safe environment away from bullies and/or	Bullying, ignorance & discrimination is rife in mainstream from students, staff at the

unprofessional teachers and principals.	departmental level, teachers & principals.
Distance Education teachers ask me openly about my thoughts and ideas on my sons learning goals and actually follow up with them	Mainstream teachers only took on board what they had too and made me feel that I was wasting my time even trying to get things implemented
My sons I.E.P is a minimum of four pages long	In mainstream my son's I.E.Ps were lucky to be one double sided A4 sheet of paper
Communication goes both ways and I am never worried about talking to any teacher about issues as I am treated respectfully and I am actually listened too!!!!	In mainstream communication and information was not forthcoming a lot of the time and I was treated horribly in the fight for my child's right to an education and often finding myself having to chase teachers in order to get a response.
In Distance Education my son does more work that is often catered to his level and abilities and made enjoyable	In mainstream my son was left doing work that was way beyond his abilities and not at his level and was not enjoyable or made engaging by teachers
In Distance Education the teachers DO what they say they are going to do, when they say they are going to do it and there is constant consistency there!	In mainstream teachers would often say one thing and do another and not be consistent and then they would not explain as to why they didn't do something or changed their minds at the drop of a hat which led to great amounts of confusion for him.
The teachers in Distance Education believe in my child's capabilities and they often show him that he is able to achieve and they boost his confidence by the way that they interact with him which eliminates stress and builds trust which sets him up to succeed rather than fail.	In mainstream the teachers didn't have any real belief in my child to succeed and they treated him like he was an idiot and lost his trust through bad interactions, inconsistent and confusing attitudes and ignorance.
Report cards are accurate and truly reflect my sons progress with his education.	The accuracy of report cards in mainstream education was often questionable and I don't think truly reflected his progress and may have been embellished to suit the school.
Teachers actually care to understand how my son learns and accept him for who he is and they aren't ignorant and will often ensure my son gets teachers the following year that will be suited to his needs and personality. Distance Education tends to have more staff available I believe than in mainstream education which also helps.	I don't think teachers in mainstream really understood my son's ways and often viewed him as an issue because of his disability. Staffing is limited in normal schools and often kids just get stuck with whoever they get stuck with.
I believe that teachers in Distance Education have far better attitudes than some school teachers & dept of education staff, simply because they realise that kids like my son are in the program as an absolute last resort and are often way behind in their learning and have also had to go through some horrible	In mainstream it is possible to get some great teachers BUT there were a lot of staff that shouldn't be in the profession and were in positions where they shouldn't have been especially given their attitudes and lack of care when it came to looking after my son

situations in mainstream. The teachers know that they really are the kid's very last line of defence. From all of the teachers that we have come into contact with so far, they are the absolute polar opposite of what my son got in mainstream education.	and doing the right thing.
Learning outcomes and assessments are made clear at the start of each year in Distance Education and they give my son plenty of prior notice of when things will be due and I know what is coming up and what is involved with the assessments etc.	I could never be sure as to what my son's learning outcomes were in mainstream education. I would not even be given a note about any projects etc that needed to be done and when and often wouldn't know unless something went wrong.
My son now completes his ALL of the work that Distance Education give him and we regularly post it back for marking and when it gets returned it will often come with some great feedback from the teachers.	My son rarely completed his school work because he wasn't able to understand it or be given enough time to complete it.
My son has the flexibility to work at his own pace and not have to slow down or keep up with others in a class plus he gets to have breaks when it most suits him.	My son didn't have the freedom to work at his own pace and be able to get up and have what we call "visual breaks" in between blocks of work.
My son has learnt the art of self motivation and time management.	Schools don't help kids learn to self motivate or effectively time manage.
Distance education allows for modified learning programs for my son which came in very handy given he had to be put back to year 3 level in some subjects when he started in year 6 due to all the basics he had missed.	My son was behind in his learning and the school refusing him sufficient help was causing him to fall further and further behind.

Complaints Process

To me, the meaning of the word “complaint” in regards to the Department of Education and the schools that I have dealt with, is the pointless and frustrating exercise which one undertakes, in the hope of resolving issues for their child only to end up on a never ending round about to nowhere land time and time again which will eventually end with the victim and their families in tears while feeling absolutely beaten down, exhausted followed by the question of why you even bothered to try.

I attempted for years to resolve the issues at the school level while never being informed of my rights to complain or how to go about complaining. My endless phone calls, meetings and visits to the school ended up being pretty much a daily occurrence for me in the end, to the point that the school office ladies never even had to ask my name when I called because they were so used to me calling that they recognised my voice and knew immediately who I was when they saw me up at the school. I would even plant myself in the office at any given time when I suspected I was being avoided just to ensure that the teachers and principal did their job. I was a royal pain in the butt and by rights I needed to be so that the staff would do something for my child. In that time, I dealt with the patronising tones, the eye rolls, the attempts to shrug me off, the insults to my intelligence, the stupid questions and the attitudes of what would you know and yet it still it got me nowhere. Despite everything, I did not at any time abuse, yell, scream, lash out or threaten any of the staff up at the school, even though sometimes I admit I was extra aggravated and upset and feeling like I was being pushed to the absolute edge. Even with all of that I still remained a calm, rational, logical and reasonable parent who never asked for anything more than a good education for my child within a safe environment where he could reach his potential, so that he could get a job and become a productive member of society in order to be as independent as possible.

It wasn't until after I had pulled my son out of school that I decided to lodge a formal complaint against the Department of Education. I originally did this by approaching the NSW Ombudsman. Long story short, they couldn't be of any use and I was referred to the Human Rights Commission instead. It was there I lodged a formal complaint against the Department of Education and the Human Rights Commission accepted it and they arranged a hearing between myself the Department of Education Representatives and their Lawyer.

At this stage in time I was at my absolute lowest point and really struggling to hold it together and go forward with the meeting. Since we had already been through so much I started wondering if I should even bother attending. It was in that moment that my son who had just been almost destroyed by his schooling experiences, plucked up the courage to say to me that he needed and wanted me to go to that meeting, not just for what happened to him but to hopefully help stop other kids from going through what he went through and hopefully help them to not end up in Distance Education and made to feel like they were not worth anything to the school system so I went. It was there I found out first hand that it was a complete waste of my time. Nothing came from it that is even worth mentioning and I left just feeling even worse than I felt going in there.

The attitudes I received during the hearing were patronising, insulting, rude & unapologetic which ultimately allowed for very little negotiations. One particular person who was a head of the department even made me feel like I was a joke and made a mockery of me through the kinds of things that they said to me. I was very upset and did not appreciate being made to feel like absolute crap when I was already at rock bottom. Just to give you an example of what I dealt with, after the hearing via a third party I was told that a conversation had taken place between the two departmental representatives that attended the hearing, where the head boss told the other person, that they had no right to explain anything to me at the hearing because that was not what they were there for and they should have not said anything to me. I

know it's hearsay but this is a prime example of the people that I had to deal with at top level within the Department of Education in my region and it needs to be said. They were not there to negotiate, apologise or do anything to help my son or my family but merely showed up because it was part of their job.

After the hearing I could have taken the matter to the Federal Circuit court as I had approached some public interest lawyers who seemed quite interested in looking at our case and potentially representing us but the financial risk was too great. It's alright for the Department to be able to afford lawyers and potentially losing the case but for us we would have been fifty times worse off if we had lost and then potentially having to pay out hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal fees and the like. Our lives were already shitty enough in the end so I decided that for our own benefit not to even bother. Like we hadn't already been through enough as it was, the last thing we needed is to be crippled financially even more than we already are and for me to ultimately lose my relationship with my husband.

Just last year, I plucked up the courage to contact Adrian Piccoli via email because I was looking to not only resolve this issue but was also trying to get some closer on it all so that we could try to move forward. I asked Mr Piccoli to deal with my complaint personally as I no longer felt there was any point in trying to resolve it with people from the Department of Education and I was hoping that he could investigate it, but my request was denied and he just ended up referring me back to the local regional area person from the Department who was interested in talking to me, but given my already horrible experiences you could appreciate WHY I didn't think it was wise to do so. In my two or three emails to Piccoli, I gave my very clear reasons to him as to WHY I felt that it was no longer possible for me to have to go to the Department and it made no difference. There was no flexibility whatsoever in the complaints process and again I ended up just feeling like I had just wasted my time.

Recommendations

Given my personal experiences and some insight to the system as well as how we have been personally impacted, I am making these recommendations so that hopefully it can inspire change and help others in the future.

- Make Distance Education easier to access for kids in NSW that wish to be a part of the program and leave mainstream entirely or even just do it part time. The whole need for a panel to sign off on it is ridiculous and should not occur. Families should be told about their options and the Department of Education should not have any say in whether or not a child does the program should their parents feel it is necessary.
- Departmental policies and regulations make it incredibly difficult for kids like mine to access funding because they don't tick boxes and fit a certain mould. I have noticed that unless, a staff member from the department or the school are knowledgeable enough when it comes to how to get around all of the red tape, the kids don't stand a chance. To be honest, if there is a clear need being identified by a teacher that would help a child learn, then the kid should have those needs met. My recommendation is to stop making it so hard for kids to get required assistance in mainstream when there are such limited places available in support classes and limited special schools available.
- Take away standardised testing from kindergarten through to year twelve. If you look at the most successful education systems in the world you will see that they do not have the need for standardised testing like we do here. My child has proven to me that exams are a waste of time and there are better ways to test outcomes without the added stress and anxiety of sitting an exam. You can still see where a child is at without them sitting in a hall or a room with peers filling out an examination paper.

- Look into the disadvantages of education when it comes to living in regional areas compared to city areas like Sydney or regional cities like Wollongong or Newcastle. I feel that by living in a regional area we are disadvantaged when it comes to choice of schools and the amount of help that is available to us. I believe that our experience was much harder compared to what it could have been like for someone in a metropolitan area. Where we are located there is only one special school available and kids must have a significant disability in order to qualify for enrolment. There is also very high demand and limited access to schools that have support classes. I feel that living here has had significant impacts on my son's quality of education and access to services as well as our extended time in chasing a diagnosis. We have faced discrimination just on the basis of where we live and have had one service initially refuse to help us because of where we are located and once reminded that it was illegal to do such a thing they relented and allowed us onto their waiting list for help.
- Scrap Naplan. Not only is it a waste of time, it does not cover a lot of key areas where a child could be doing well in and only shows a very small snap shot of a student's progress. I feel that it is also an unnecessary stress to kids at school just so that the government can collect their data and was not originally designed for the students and parents to see results. Too much valuable time and energy is spent on preparing students for these exams when the time could be spent on other more valuable things.
- Set and implement strict minimum education standards that must be adhered to in every NSW school in order to bring all schools into line so that there is a consistency across NSW. From personal experience I have seen first-hand how schools can vary so much when it comes to what they do for children. Since our experience, I heard that some mainstream schools will provide help for kids that they identify as having issues that don't have a diagnosis and yet my son was refused any help without one. I

apologise if there are supposed to be standards for that already but from where I am standing I believe there are none.

- I would love to see some special recognition placed in the inquiry report for all of the families and children that have been badly impacted by the NSW education system and I would like it formally recognised that the NSW education system does have a long way to go in order to fix these issues and weed out those who are clearly not doing their jobs.
- If parents are given little option but to leave the system with their child due to system failures, there should be training programs in place for them so that they are able to be guided in how to best help their child and get through the years of education. I personally have been left to just muddle through without much guidance from anyone apart from my son's teachers and whatever networks I can find online.
- Pay parents a superannuation allowance direct into their super funds if they have to be a full time carer who educates at home, as we are doing an important job after all by picking up the pieces for the education system and not being given the other allowances that teachers would be given when they are educating a child and we should not have these experiences have to impact us for the rest of our lives and prevent us from putting into our superannuation for retirement.
- Create an independent watch dog or a panel that parents can turn to when the Department of Education and the schools are not doing their job in order to push for more accountability. Too many people are not doing the right thing by students and their families and are not held accountable for their actions.
- Put severe penalties in place for Teachers, Principals and Department of Education staff that are discriminatory and fail to uphold their duty of care or do their job in a professional manner and are abusive toward students.

- Give information out to all families when their children are in mainstream school about how to complain, who to complain to, when to complain, and what they can complain about and just even inform everyone that there is a complaints process and things that they can do when the schools and the Department are not doing the right thing. Also add in the information about how to chase for a diagnosis if it be required, who to contact, and who the services are that can help with a diagnosis and advocacy if need be. Knowledge is **power**!
- Help to stop cuts to family Centrelink payments that are absolutely crushing so many people who have been left in these kinds of horrible situations by the broken and inadequate school system here in NSW. It's not fair that we be subjected to further disadvantage due to circumstances that were beyond our control.
- Improve the States Departmental guidelines for Education that are often vague and quite loosely interpreted to suit those who are in charge of making decisions and can be used against people rather than for them. From personal experience I have argued with the department about their own policies and gotten no-where because of their ability to twist and turn words to suit their own interpretations.
- Bullying, isolation, abuse, harassment needs to be stamped out of schools across the state.
- Change the complaints process by making it more flexible and less rigid when it comes to addressing these issues. Don't make families have to keep going back to the same people that were of no use in the first place in order to get their situations resolved.
- Change the teaching model so that it guides students rather than instructs them. Currently we have a behaviourist instruction model where it directly instructs kids rather than guiding them and also creates a type of competition between kids because

it forces teachers to compare students and students to compare themselves to their peers rather than helping kids to accept each other's differences and encouraging collaboration between students. I believe the Finnish education system has it right when it comes to the way they teach and they have set standards across the board so that there is consistency in what is being taught and how it is taught and it makes no difference as to what school your child attends because they are all the same.