

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

Name: Ms Deanna Harradine, Ms Louise Penny, Mrs Skye Rose and
Name suppressed (PC)

Date received: 24 February 2017

Partially
Confidential

The Hon Michael Gallacher MLC
CHAIR
GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE NO. 3

24th February, 2017

Dear Committee Chair,

Re: Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs in government and non-government schools in New South Wales

As parents of school-aged children on the autism spectrum, we welcome the opportunity to make this submission to your Legislative Council Inquiry.

Our children attend either the independent ASPECT Vern Barnett School (VB) in Forestville, or satellite classes administered and staffed by VB, placed largely in Catholic schools. We believe ASPECT provides the most appropriate schooling for children on the autism spectrum in the Northern Beaches area.

ASPECT Vern Barnett (VB) is a transitional school. The objective for each student is to provide them with adequate skills to be able to learn and thrive in a mainstream school environment. The first step is to transition from 'Base' (VB) to one of the satellite classes, and from there to a mainstream school.

Growing autism diagnoses in the community, combined with a lack of satellite classes, has resulted in many families being placed on a lengthy waiting list to enrol their child at VB. The author of this submission is aware of a number of schools, (eg.) with currently vacant or underutilised spaces that could be used for satellite classes. Significantly, ASPECT VB provides the teaching staff and insurance coverage for these classes. It also pays host schools rent for the facilities used.

Many parents on behalf of whom this submission is made, have been engaged in a lengthy (two year) exercise, to persuade Department schools on the Northern Beaches to allow satellite classes to be established on their campuses. So far, these intense efforts have been fruitless.

The attached annexures document these efforts, commencing in June 2015 with an invitation from Public Schools NSW to give 'considerations to managing' our concerns 'as a complaint'; please see ATTACHMENT A, below. Our initial reaction was positive, as we had connected with an 'agent of change'. We were very disappointed when advised to make a further complaint; please see ATTACHMENT E.

We invite Committee members to read the attached annexures as they provide a narrative that clearly demonstrates our experiences and illustrates our concerns. Primarily our concerns relate to inclusion of our children within school communities as envisaged in Article 24 of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. The responses to our complaints by the Department and the then Minister contained fine rhetoric, but again, left us disappointed.

We were also disturbed by the request to keep correspondence confidential. We conclude this request is made to hide the shame of a department doing little to address the educational needs of our children.

We have been devastated by the response of principals to our requests. Among those responses, that neuro-typical children have more right than our children to the use of spare classrooms, some of which are used as storerooms or for gatherings held just once a month. One principal told a parent that children with ASD could cause their neuro-typical schoolmates to have nightmares. The lack of understanding of ASD and empathy illustrated by this comment is simply breathtaking.

We approached forty public schools on the Northern Beaches. Not one said it could spare a classroom for ASPECT VB students, despite the existence of appropriate space. We can only view this lack of desire to assist our children as discriminatory. If our children were not at the ASPECT VB school, or its satellite classes, they would have a right to attend their local public schools.

We have received conflicting messages. On one hand we were informed by the Department that funding was available to support our children in a mainstream setting. On the other hand, we were told by several school principals that their schools could not support our children due to funding constraints. Our children are at risk of becoming victims of a process whereby the Department says they're welcome but schools on the ground reject them. ATTACHMENT B below highlights these conflicting messages.

From our experience it appears the Department is reluctant to change. We feel ATTACHMENT D demonstrates this. We believe there is room for the Department to adjust its thinking with respect to accommodating our children. We were surprised that the Department appeared to be resistant to reform that would benefit our children. It is notable that some special needs programs in public schools still have vacancies whereas ASPECT Vern Barnett has a growing waiting list.

When we were again informed by the Department that our issues would not be addressed, upon voicing our concern with that outcome, we were advised to lodge yet another complaint. Please see ATTACHMENT E below.

We returned to our local State MP for assistance, Mr Rob Stokes. He arranged two meetings with Department of Education Area Network Directors for the Northern Beaches:

meeting was very sympathetic and promising. He advised that he would work with the local principals of and . However, we were later informed by that no classroom was available due to local student population growth. (Please see ATTACHMENT F). This was very disappointing as again it was apparent our children are not considered 'local' to any school, even though they live in these areas.

Our meeting with was more fruitful. She noted that while the Department initially needed to find more classrooms for their special needs students, she was committed to locating at least one classroom for ASPECT VB's transitional program. also acknowledged that ASPECT has developed a world leading autism education program.

She noted that given ASPECT's autism expertise, it would be very beneficial for staff in public schools to collaborate with staff from ASPECT. This would assist with professional development and support, as contemplated by the Memorandum of Understanding between the Department of Education and ASPECT. (Please see ATTACHMENT L). This would be in contrast to the 'them v us' attitude we feel exists between Department schools and ASPECT parents.

Since our meeting with _____, Mr Stokes has been appointed NSW Education Minister. He advised that he would "ask _____ to get back to you as soon as possible on the issue of capacity for satellite classes in NSW Public Schools in Northern Sydney". (Please see ATTACHMENT K). While our local member, Mr Stokes, has been an active advocate, despite his efforts we have been able to achieve little for our children.

Our experience through this process has left us with an impression that policy aimed at helping our children is being ignored at the local public school level. Parents on whose behalf this submission is made, ask the committee to make the following recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. That ASPECT and the NSW Department of Education renew the Memorandum of Understanding (please see ATTACHMENT L) which lapsed in the first term of 2015.
2. That the Department and ASPECT establish a joint working party to further the aims of the MOU, particularly with respect to **Satellite classes**, namely;

"At the local and regional level, staff collaborate in the planning, implementation and operation of Aspect satellite classes in Department schools."

3. That the Department order an audit of classroom use in all NSW public schools to identify spaces which may be used to further the aims expressed in the MOU.
4. That ASPECT and the Department coordinate to provide annual courses exploring the most effective methods of teaching students on the autism spectrum; and that these courses be available annually to all teachers in the NSW public school system.

We again thank the committee for the opportunity to make this submission.

Ms Deanna
Harradine

Mrs Skye Rose

Ms Louise Penny