

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

Name: Name suppressed (PC)

Date received: 27 February 2017

Partially
Confidential

To the Honourable Member Michael Gallacher,

RE: Inquiry into Students with a Disability or Special Needs in NSW Schools

This letter provides a human experience from the perspective of a mother of a teenager with cerebral palsy (CP) who completed the HSC in 2016.

CP manifests as visual, neurological and physical impairments. requires visual and walking aids. disabilities caused significant challenges to full participation in mainstream education.

journey through the education system was ultimately successful: his determination and perseverance saw him matriculate to do a Bachelor of Social Science and Policing. Notwithstanding, journey was at times frustrated by barriers to access and opportunity. It's important to acknowledge that access disadvantage impacted learning and social integration, whilst causing considerable stress on our family.

To summarise journey:

was discouraged from starting primary school until the age of 6, because he was developmentally delayed and non-mobile. He then repeated Kindergarten because he was not learning. He attended 3 primary schools and 2 high schools before finally completing the HSC.

attended a catholic school from years 4 to 6, which further disadvantaged him due to underfunding and lack of professional skills. We were told by one teacher that she did not have time to "prepare special worksheets just for him". Consequently, he struggled to keep up with the class, while often being excluded from group activities. spent most of the break, lunch and sports periods sitting alone.

Transitioning to high school was a huge challenge, for a number of reasons. Initially, was unable attend his local public high school because it was over-subscribed and the build environment was unfit for someone with a physical disability. As parents we felt frustrated with the process and time it would take to make accessibility modifications (e.g. railings, ramps, lifts). We explored local private schools. We were offered enrolment at a private school on a full-fee paying basis, however, access to a teacher's aide would be at our additional expense.

Getting a placement in a mainstream public high-school with adequate facilities in our region seemed impossible. Senior executives in the Department of Education advised that we would be "better off" going to a segregated "physical unit" and doing "life-skills"; a recommendation that we point-blank refused.

We approached a nearby public high school for enrolment, because the premises were somewhat access-friendly. We were told that since we are "outside the local catchment" and the school was "over-subscribed and had to give priority to local students" admission was conditional on accepting enrolment in the so-called "IM class" – a segregated unit for kids of a range ages with varying disabilities, including hearing and vision impairments, neurological, learning and behavioural disabilities. We were promised would have

access to mainstream classes if he demonstrated aptitude and interest. Out of desperation, we accepted the offer.

was the only child with a physical disability in the segregated IM class; whilst most of the student had behavioural issues. Sadly, was restricted access to certain areas of the playground because “there was no teacher supervision available”, which impacted his social integration. He was banned from using the lift without teacher supervision, which delayed movement around the school.

During his junior high school years 7 to 9 in a segregated class room, was doing an “individualised learning program” which comprised computer-based, repetitive, monotonous activities. participated in mainstream geography and computing classes in years 8 and 9. In year 9 was demonstrating capability and interest in mathematics, but was denied access to the maths curriculum in a mainstream class, because “he would not keep-up”. Frustrated with the lack of opportunity we took out of school.

We then reapproached our local high school, At this point we felt was physically strong enough to navigate the school grounds safely in his K-Walker. The presiding Principal had the wisdom and foresight to see potential in accepting enrolment. Within a year the school added a lift and ramps. experience in mainstream high school was blessed with an exceptional cohort of teachers who understand the principles of equal access, recognised his potential, and committed 200% of their time to his academic integration. Consequently, successfully completed the HSC over three years (pathways), graduating in 2016. On this basis is an exemplar of excellence in achieving Disability Education Standards.

With this experience in mind and reflecting on the goals of “Every Student, Every School” Policy, I provide the following general observations and recommendations:

Observations:

- i. There is lack of transparency regarding the rights of children with disabilities and opportunities for full integration. Consequently, parents struggle to navigate the process of finding the right school, gaining access and advocating for their child.
- ii. There is huge disparity among schools in their approach to integration and to implementing the Disability Education Standards (DES). Principals have too much decision making discretion in regards to how DES principles are applied in their school.
- iii. Old schools fail to be inclusive due to their antiquated built environment. Consequently, such schools are completely closed to kids with physical and sensory disabilities.
- iv. There is a huge skills and talent gap in mainstream schools, possibly due to lack of real-world experience in working with students with disabilities, as well as lack of formal training. Some schools have embraced training to support teachers, whilst others are lagging behind in building the capability need to maintain an inclusive classroom.
- v. There is insufficient funding to support the activities required to “make reasonable adjustments”, so students rely on the generosity and time of teachers to achieve inclusion.
- vi. The education department has not fully embraced the full scope of assistive and adaptive technologies designed to enhance integration and enable learning.

Recommendations:

- i. That each child with a disability have the right to reach their full potential and the right to equal access to the curriculum in a mainstream classroom, irrespective of their physical and intellectual aptitude.
- ii. That each child be assigned an Education and Advocacy Case Manager who is responsible for: 1) assisting parents with enforcing rights, 2) outlining education pathways that promote achievement of full education potential, 3) developing individual education plans, 4) accessing assistive technologies, 5) establishing learning links and networks, and 5) advocating for equal access, funding, inclusion and the rights of the child.
- iii. That each school implement a Disability Education Inclusion Plan, including, but not limited to minimum level of staff education and training, required adjustments to build environment to achieve full accessibility, and requirements for assistive technologies.
- iv. That the Australian Government through the COAG and Departments of Education enforce minimum performance standards that align with the DES, and introduce a school accreditation process that provides parents with a benchmark for assessing a school's inclusiveness.
- v. That the Department of Education undertake a technology review of every public and private school, with the view of identifying gaps and barriers to full adoption of assistive and adaptive technologies. That the Department of Education provide sufficient funding to bring all schools up to a minimum level of technology standard.
- vi. That funding made available under the NDIS be allocated to individual in-school therapy and teacher support.