

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

Name: Merrylands East Public School (PC)

Date received: 24 February 2017

Partially
Confidential

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

Merrylands East Public School is pleased to make this submission to the Upper House Committee and welcomes the opportunity of school representative to appear before any public hearings to share the experience of staff in relation to disabilities.

Context

Merrylands East Public School is situated on traditional Aboriginal Dharruk land, near the main central business district of Parramatta. The vision of MEPS is to "create the future" in a safe, supportive learning environment where all students develop knowledge and skills necessary to be self-directed and collaborative problem solvers in a global society. Underpinning this vision is the instilment of strong core values for all students of fairness, participation, excellence, honesty, respect and responsibility.

With the assistance of Social Ventures Australia and other partnerships, Merrylands East has developed a strong collaborative network of global innovative educators; Merrylands East is creating the future for learning with school hours from 8am to 1:15pm.

Merrylands East is continually building a broad range of open learning spaces and pedagogies, and uses ICT as a tool for learning and connecting via twitter @merrylandseast. The student population is drawn from over 40 socio-cultural backgrounds predominately from Islander, African, Middle Eastern and Asian communities. Ninety one per cent of students speak a language other than English and around 10% have refugee experiences. The student population, while stable around the 370 mark, has a proportion which is transient (20%), with students leaving being replaced by new arrivals. The vast majority of students commence learning English for the first time when entering school at varying school years. English as an Additional Language or Dialect programs and a strong Learning Support team are complemented with 'Gonski funded' Speech Pathologist, Occupational Therapist and a community Nurse to provide support for students to access our school's curriculum.

Recommendations:

Merrylands East PS recommends that:

- the criteria for the allocation of Learning and Support Teachers be reviewed based on the National Consistent Collection of Data for Disabilities.
- the Department provides highly tertiary qualified Learning and Engagement Officers who have classroom expertise in assisting schools in making reasonable adjustments.
- additional School for Specific Purposes be built in areas of population expansion like the South Western Sydney Area.
- additional Emotional Disturb / Behaviour support classes be created.
- the Department of Education makes transparent all data associated with students requesting support class and SSP placements as their first choice and the number of student who have been decline.
- the Emergency Funding be revamped to consider the full extent of a child's disabilities.
- the placement panel across the state of NSW be aligned to enable ONE consistent process.

(b) the impact of the Government's 'Every Student Every School' policy on the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs in New South Wales public schools

Merrylands East has identified 64 students with a broad range of disabilities including physical, cognitive, sensory, and social/emotional. Each of these students have a personal learning plan devised by the Learning and Support Teacher and classroom teachers as part of the reasonable adjustment under the Disabilities Discrimination Act and the Disabilities Standards for Education.

Merrylands East Public School has seen a decreased in the level of support for children with disabilities since the introduction of Every Student Every School in 2013 and the reallocation of statewide funding. In 2012, Merrylands East had a full time (1.0 EFT) Learning and Support Teacher. Over the past 4 years, our school allocation has been halved to 0.5 (EFT) with an allocation of flexible funding. In 2017, this amount is \$30 918 or the equivalent of engaging a School Learning and Support Officer (formerly known as a Teacher's Aide) for 3 terms in the year and does not make up for the resources that were lost from 2012.

2012 – 1.0 Equivalent Full time teacher (EFT)

2013- 0.8 EFT

2014 – 0.5 EFT

2015 – 0.5 EFT

2016 – 0.5 EFT

2017 – 0.5 EFT

This reduction is in contrast with the Questions and Answers on the Department's website about Every Student and Every School:

"18. Will there be a reduction in the number of school learning support officers (formerly known as teachers' aides)?"

There will be no reduction in over 4,000 school learning support officer full time equivalent positions now employed to work in regular or special classes and schools.

This initiative will not reduce funding. Funding will be allocated to schools annually, according to student learning needs, enabling allocations to schools to be adjusted according to changing needs of schools."

The impact in the reduction of resourcing under the Every Student Every School program has resulted in an increase workload for teachers but more importantly, students with disabilities are not receiving the full level of support required as part of their reasonable adjustment.

Merrylands East Public School has reallocated funding for students in other programs under the provisions of Local Schools Local Decisions to meet the shortfall in the reduction of funding for students with disabilities.

For example, in 2016, our school had a Kindergarten students that required a full-time School Learning Support Officer due to the emotional trauma that she had experienced in her background, the propensity to leave the classroom at any time. Her personal safety was at risk. Merrylands East engaged a full time School Learning Support Officer (SLSO) to assist the student to access the curriculum but at any time, the student could easily withdraw from the classroom. The funding of the SLSO meant that any area of learning had to suffer.

In the same year, our school also had a full time SLSO for a student with a physical and learning disability who would regularly soil himself in the classroom and smear faeces on the classroom carpet and furniture. Each time this happened, the school had to contact a forensic cleaner to ensure the Health and Safety of other students in the room. It also necessitate the evacuation of other student for their personal safety. Funding for the forensic cleaner was carried by the school budget. This same student required rails to assist him climbing up stairs. In 2015, the access request was submitted by the school for this request. In January 2017, the rails were finally installed but now the child has left the school.

13. What about students with moderate or high levels of learning and support needs?

Students with disability who have moderate or high levels of need and who are enrolled in regular classes will continue to be supported through the Integration Funding Support program, without change.

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The online access request process and placement panel process is antiquated, slow and broken. It does not meet the needs of students. Under the DDA and DSE, Merrylands East PS consults with students and parents, make the reasonable adjustment for education to the same with the available resources. Whenever school based resources have been exhausted, the school makes an application for support classes via the access request process. This is a time consuming process that requires the gathering and uploading of evidence from paraprofessional, psychologists, paediatricians and class teachers – all experienced and experts. The information ascertained for the access request is from experts but the decision makers qualification in special education tends to be more experience than expertise.

Merrylands East PS staff are aware that the access request process for placement is more like a ‘lottery’ rather than needs based process. Students have missed out in the past for a support class placement despite parent wishes and the

recommendations of experts. It is clear that there are not enough vacancies in support classes and staff are often frustrated in being told that “all students with disabilities are supported.” We refute this statement as the support is either a small monetary amount that does not compare to a class of 8 students with a School Learning Support Officer and a qualified Special Education teacher to a mainstream who has been steered to an online course. Support in the Department could be a phone call, a visit by the Learning and Engagement Officer or a small monetary contribution.

A major issue facing most schools is the enrolment of students with high and complex needs and disabilities. In these instances, schools can apply for Emergency Funding to support the interim needs of a child after enrolment. The Emergency funding for a school in Macquarie Park Operational Network is around \$750.00 or the equivalent to 2 ½ days of a School Learning Support Officer. This is totally inadequate funding when risk assessment, personal learning plans and behaviour plans must be written and consultation taken place with all keystakeholders.

(d) complaint and review mechanisms within the school systems in New South Wales for parents and carers

There is no complaint or review process for parents and caregivers in disabilities apart from the NSEW DoE complaint Procedures. Parents from low socio-economic communities and non-English speaking background are unaware of the Human Rights Commission or the NSW Ombudsman Office as a form of appeal.

Normally when a parent complains to the Department, the matter is managed by the Department's complaint procedures with very little or no support from senior management. Often, complaints are somewhat resolved by the Department of Education Learning and Engagement Officers visiting schools and making suggestion about curriculum. Often these Learning and Engagement Officers may or may not have the necessary qualifications to be advising principals and teachers. Certainly, mainly of the Learning and engagement Officers do not have special education degrees, psychology or paediatric qualifications or have been involved in trauma management. Nor are they in a position to fully understand the complexity of student when making decisions as part of the placement panel process.

More often than not, principals are placed in the inevitable position of making untenable decisions related to the resourcing of students with disabilities within the school's overall limited resources.

(e) any other related matters

