

Submission
No 396

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

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential



As public school teachers and NSW Teachers Federation members we continue to campaign for the right of every student to receive a public education of the highest quality and for all students to become successful learners.

We are committed to equity and excellence for every student and in doing so assert, as was confirmed in The Review of Funding for Schooling (Gonski Review) that it costs more to deliver on these values for students with disability.

We will not stand by the currently inadequate provision of education to students with disability and the lifelong implications this inequity has.

The National Education Reform Agreement (NERA) and Australian Education Act 2013, acknowledge the requirement for, and commitment to additional funds for students with disability. The NSW government's unwavering commitment to the Gonski funding model paves the way for this investment to be realised.

We stand ready to work with our employer and NSW government in delivering equitable quality education but can only do so effectively when equipped with the necessary tools and supported by a system that is responsive to need.

We offer the following submission as an index of unmet need and a call for equity for every student.

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

With the increased diversity of students in mainstream settings, there is an increase in students requiring adjustments to teaching, learning and assessment activities. Many teachers are not receiving any additional support / training in meeting the needs of these students and they are often expected to learn on the job. This causes a great deal of stress to the teacher and student and can provide disruption to the class. Limited access to professionals with expertise in catering for the specific needs of some students is one of the main causes for teachers feeling unprepared and unsupported, not to mention the number of students that are not able to access the support required. Teachers have access to some in school specialist through Learning and Support teachers and School counsellors, however the ratio of support staff to student makes it challenging at times to provide timely interventions to effectively support students. As a school we are regularly refining our referral systems to ensure that all concerns are heard and addressed as soon as possible based on a priority basis, however some situations escalate before the support is able to be implemented and it is often forced to occur on a reactive basis rather than proactive. When students are transitioning into the school setting we are able to complete a lengthy application process to apply for integration funding. This does still feel limited to relying on the already over used school specialists and it is difficult to find additional specialists that are willing to support on a temporary basis. Further training around alternative supports available to be used with integration funding would prove beneficial as this is at times unclear. On a number of occasions schools exhaust all support options available and need to look for additional settings that will provide the level of support required for the student to experience success. Unfortunately, the number of support places available is inadequate for the number of students requiring this level of support. As a result, a large portion of students are declined support and therefore draw significant portions of the school specialists support, impacting on not only the student but other students requiring support. The Access Request process is often unclear and inconsistent. There is little to no feedback provided for why students were successful or

unsuccessful and any possible strategies / support available for those remaining in a mainstream setting. As a result of stretched resources, the specialist support team, along with the class teachers, do not have adequate time to ensure they are providing the most effective support strategies and to regularly liaise with all stakeholders to assess the impact or plan future directions. As a result of this, schools are very reactive to the needs of students and are only able to manage the needs causing most disruption. There is currently insufficient time and access to professionals to build the capacity of staff so they can feel confident in supporting students with diverse needs and know where to go if they require further support.

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.

Whilst the initial aim of 'Every Student Every School' (ESES) was to ensure that schools were provided with the tools required to ensure all students were accessing the necessary support, this has not been sustained to the required level. It is with a doubt that for students to gain the best support we must continually collaborate with all stakeholders and professionals in the field. However, this is unsustainable for regular teachers and the limited access to school specialist. Meetings are required to be completed during short breaks throughout the day and rarely involve professional input due to financial and time restraints. Further to these challenges, school staff do not know what they do not know. More often than not they are unsure where to access support or what options could even be available. Our Learning and Support Teachers are rapidly seeking ongoing professional learning to try and keep up with the ongoing diversity of needs within the school and are expected to be the expert on disabilities they are just learning of. In a large school of 1200 students, the ability to provide in class support is limited and does not allow for enough time to see real gains from interventions that have been put in place with the class teacher. It is helpful for staff to have an initial access point through their Learning and Support teacher, however the time taken from initial referral to gathering information, developing strategies and upskilling the class teacher is not able to be as timely as required. There has been a positive shift in raising the expectation for all students and we are ensuring that all students are provided with an opportunity to be challenged and progress. Unfortunately, this is at times perceived as increased pressure on teachers as they are expected to assess the needs of all students and develop ways to support their needs with minimal expert help. Teachers are seeing upwards of 150 different students a day and the complexity of their needs are increasing. This increased accountability combined with the perception that there is insufficient support is impacting on the retention and wellbeing of staff.

C) Developments since the 2010 inquiry by General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2 into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs and the implementation of its recommendations.

The NSW Government claimed to be advocating a transparent funding mechanism to meet the need of students with disabilities or additional learning needs, however the process for selecting who will receive funding and at what level is still very unclear. This includes the whole-school funding as well as feedback on integration and USS funding for students with a disability. This information is not readily available to schools and there is limited support in applying for the funds available. The department made a commitment to investigate the level of unmet special education places and increase the availability to ensure there were adequate placements available. Not only has there been limited feedback in regards to this investigation there has also been little to no involvement from our school in regards to providing information towards this investigation. We regularly have students that meet the threshold of requiring additional support through special class or setting, however they have not been successful due to extensive waiting lists. As a result of this they are often no longer engaging with the school system as it is not supporting their needs and the school does not have any

further sustainable supports to offer. In consideration of the Department's evaluation of behaviour settings, there is a focus on reducing the period of time spent in behaviour schools, however there is minimal to no support offered to either school in regards to the successful transition of students back into mainstream settings. Additional resources are required to allow for smoother transition, building staff capacity, increasing student confidence and more sustained in class support for the student. The initial roll out of the Department's focus on providing learning support staff with special education training seen one of our staff members gain access to a supportive educational program with funding assistance. Whilst there is still some support for this, staff are now required to arrange a large portion of this for themselves and as the course is not ran through the Department there are often challenges with the course impacting on the current teaching load. If we are relying on an in school expert, we need to ensure that they are upskilled with minimal resistance. The development of Individual Education Plans is a crucial element of supporting students in mainstream high schools. The Department made a commitment to provide additional resources, including relief time for teachers to develop IEPs, however these supports have not been available. Currently there are huge variations on IEPs and the lack of direction and support to develop these plans results in plans that are not being utilised to their full potential and therefore staff and students not being supported.

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

As a school we work exceptionally hard on including our parents and carers as much as possible throughout all stages of support for our students. Whilst we aim to do this as much as possible, we are at times restricted by resources to do this in a timely manner. Teachers have an extremely high workload during school hours and trying to find time to align all stakeholders to meet for consultation meetings can be extremely challenging. Further to this, when parents raise concerns about the support for their student it is difficult to know exactly where to get support from or simple steps to respond to these complaints. It is easy to feel isolated despite all efforts to offer as much support as possible with the resources available.

E) Any other related matters.

For our students to be able to gain the support required to effectively meet their needs we need to ensure that we have access to experts that can build the capacity of staff to provide this support. These experts need to be known, accessible (timely and financially) and provide sustained support. Teachers understand and promote the need to support all students. It is not from a lack of desire to support them but more from an inability to have the expertise in managing every diverse need that they are currently exposed to in a classroom. Further transparency is required around the various supports that are available already and schools should be provided with assistance to access these supports. At times it feels that funding and resources are hidden from schools with the fear that they will be used up. As a result, schools are not meeting the needs of their students when this can easily be rectified with resources that are already set up. Feedback is also required on unsuccessful application for resources so that schools not only understand why but the student and their parent/carer has a clear understanding also.

This email was sent from the NSW Teachers Federation website.