

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

**Name:** Name suppressed  
**Date received:** 3 March 2017

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Partially  
Confidential

Re: Submission to the NSW Parliament 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 hope you are able to accept this late submission.

**What is your experience regarding access to resources and funding for students with disability?**

Our experience relates to our daughter who is now 10 years old and has an intellectual disability as well as sensory issues, fine motor and gross motor delay, mobility issues, and uncontrolled epilepsy.

Our daughter has now attended four schools, three government school and one private school.

We have twice tried placing our child in a government support class in a mainstream school (kindergarden and fourth class) and both times we have had to move her to a different school setting because the level of care and tailoring of the service to her needs was so inadequate that it was causing her emotional harm and behavioural issues not to mention lack of academic learning.

The first time, in kindergarden, the issue was the use of behaviour management practices that involved inappropriate punishments and poor understanding of our daughter's disability and capabilities. For example, in response to not following instructions like going to the toilet (which is a skill she is still building 6 years later), she was placed outside of the classroom on her own, which caused her to become extremely distressed and wet herself, on numerous occasions and she was excluded from preferred activities like music and art. She was also made to sit by the pool for a whole day of swimming because she had not listened to the teacher's request to hold their hand while they travelled to the pool, something which was not a normal behaviour of our daughter and which I think would have been addressed by slow and careful communication. These punishments seemed cruel, unlikely to have any positive effect and based on a misunderstanding of our daughter's ability to regulate her behaviour without appropriate support and communication.

When we raised our concerns about the swimming incident we were told the action was taken because it was a safety issue. This ignored that she probably needed more time to process information and calm down, they had got her to the pool anyway so safety was no longer a issue and that the swimming activity would have actually made her calmer and able to process information better. It seemed to me that it was not a safety issue but a punishment which was out of proportion to the action.

There was also an unnecessary focus on blanket rules. For example, our daughter was repeatedly told not to blow raspberries. I explained this was a development step and that blowing air through her lips was something the speech therapist encouraged as an oral motor therapy. Rather than ignore the behaviour, the teachers were adamant that it was not allowed because it was spitting and they repeatedly would tell her no spitting which would prompt her to do it again and there was no change in their approach. I became increasingly concerned when a private OT who was in the classroom supporting another child made contact with me to alert me to her concerns about the punishments that were occurring.

When the issues were raised with the deputy principal, they did not accept our concerns and continued to tell us that she needed to learn consequences and that all children have to follow

the blanket rules. They never tried to understand the underlying causes of the behaviour or modifying the setting and program to suit her needs. We felt that we had no option but to withdraw from the public system and enrol our daughter in a private school which was one hour drive each way from our house. Our daughter attended the non-government school for 3 years and we were happy with the care and learning environment but eventually the travel became an issue and we decided to enrol her in a support class in a local mainstream school for year 4.

However, in the new support class, the level of communication, prompting and support that our daughter requires was not provided, the classroom setting was chaotic and disorganised and the physical environment was completely inappropriate for someone who has mobility issues (for instance multiple sets of steps throughout the school grounds, activities spread across the school requiring movement from one area to another, lack of ramps anywhere to facilitate movement). There was no attempt, despite several meetings, to make any adaptations to accommodate her needs. It seemed as though there was little genuine care for the children and there was a rigid adherence to the idea of inclusion without any modifications or support that would enable students to meaningfully participate. There was no effort made to assess our daughter's needs before she arrived in the class. For example, we provided an extensive package of reports by OTs, speech, medical professionals that were never read by the deputy school principal.

In addition, staff including the deputy principal made offensive comments about our daughter including describing her as having 'very poor mobility skills' in our first meeting. When we told them she would need support with toileting we were told that they focus on independent skills and she would need to develop these skills if she was to attend the school. The staff seemed to be untrained in how to communicate with children with behavioural issues and our daughter started to show negative behaviours that we had not seen before and did not occur in other settings i.e. after school care and group activities with respite providers. The school developed a behaviour plan that was written from the perspective of concern for teachers safety (again something which has never been an issue in any other setting). The decision to move her to another setting was made when we realised that no matter how many times or who we raised concerns with, the type of care and support in that class would never change. This was reinforced to me when another parent told me seriously that the three years in which her child (who had mild needs) has been in the class have been the worst years in her life. That is quite a condemning assessment and shows that the issues were not limited to the classes inability to accommodate more complex needs kids but also to provide support for kids with mild disabilities.

We have now placed our daughter in a government special needs school where the teaching and care is of an extremely high standard and in my opinion meets best practice in working with students with disabilities. While it might be that she is now in a setting which is specifically set up to meet her needs, I think that it is also a cultural issue amongst the staff, from the Principal through to teachers and support workers. They are patient and focus on each child's strengths and needs in order to learn and are well supported. She has made huge improvements in learning and academic areas like reading and maths for the first time ever.

To summarise our experience the attitude of teachers and managers in support classes seems to be overly and disproportionately punitive, lacking a truly individual approach, lacking extra support and modifications to allow for real inclusion, poorly designed facilities, classrooms and playground that are unsuitable for children with physical issues and a lack of interest and intent to really work out what the child needs and work collaboratively with parents. Support class staff need to learn from the advancements that have made in therapeutic disciplines and move away from blanket rules and consequences for behaviours when they are not applicable to the child's

level of development. This could be achieved by having therapists to support teachers and including therapeutic approaches in special needs teacher training. Blanket rules should also not be applied without considering whether the child intended to break a rule or has the ability to follow a rule.

As a family with two working parents, the lack of suitable and appropriate after school and vacation care options has been a massive issue. Mainstream care could work but only if the program and setting is in every aspect developed to suit special needs children as much as mainstream children and as long as there is a proportionate split of mainstream and special needs kids. Special needs kids shouldn't be expected to fit into a setting or program which is not designed for them in any sense. I doubt if any mainstream parents would happily put their children into a care facility which has been entirely set up for special needs kids. I feel that this lack of alternatives to mainstream after school and vacation care is a systemic issue for parents, particularly women, who have a child with a disability.

**What is your experience of accessing complaint or review mechanisms regarding education?**

Every time we raised a complaint with a teacher and then Deputy Principal in the support class, we felt that our concern was not listened to, was not taken seriously and no action was taken. The primary concern of the school seemed to be to justify their actions and to ensure they were protected from any negative consequences (for example, by preparing a Behaviour Management Plan which focused on teacher safety rather than developing a plan which would address our daughter's needs more appropriately). I never had any sense that staff welcomed feedback or were concerned with improving their teaching. I was never informed by staff that I could make a formal complaint. I have never been advised that there is a NSW Government complaints process and that the Department welcomes feedback to improve its service. As a result, the only option we had to address the situation was to take our daughter out of that setting and place her in a different school which has meant her education has been disrupted and lacking in continuity.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide our views for this important inquiry.

Regards,