

**Submission
No 420**

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

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Parliament of New South Wales

Submission: NSW Parliamentary 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'm writing to this inquiry in the hopes that I can highlight as have others of the need for urgent reform to the provision of education to students with a disability and special needs in NSW.

I'm a mother of 3 special needs children on the Autism Spectrum, aged 10, 11 and 12, ranging from Asperger's, mild and moderate to severe delay and a 4th neuro typical child. My children currently attend 4 different schools. I have found the search for an educational institution that provided for the very different needs each of my children often limiting, at times disappointing, exhausting and depressing. Despite all of that I found primary schools that have been willing to work with us and have been as good a fit at it's possible and my children have progressed and grown, these institutions are private and in the catholic systemic school's system. It is now time to find High Schools and the sheer disappointment I'm feeling about the very limited provisions and places have lead me to despair and write to you in the hopes that this situation will change, if not in time for my children then for those of others.

The lack of provisions in the current system across the board in both government and non-government is heartbreaking, there are a few exceptional examples but these institutions do not have the capacity to take all the children in their waiting lists let alone in the state. Their best practice examples are not followed by others largely due to resources but also expectations and the training and qualifications of those who teach them, despite the patience and good hearts of some exceptional people.

Simply there are also not enough places for our very special children, the system struggles and it is impossible to guarantee a spot in the government system, while in the non-government system the option often does not even exist. I know of a family who went to the Panel for an autistic unit and where passed on to further panels four times, with no place for their child ever materialising. I have talked to many schools and finding a transition spot ranges from extremely hard to impossible. Not knowing where your child will be able to attend causes much unnecessary stress to families already living under stressful circumstances.

The current level of provisions is patchy and limited and planning for provisions of special needs children seems limited and often completely inadequate. The increasing and higher rates of disabilities among boys would require more significant level of provisions than is currently provided within the Sydney metropolitan area by government and non-government schools. It is however no surprise given that the Education Department can't even provide for sufficient spaces in areas of in-fill development. As a former senior strategic (urban) planner I find the lack of planning highly frustrating, all of this was predictable.

In primary school, I have been fortunate but I have heard the tales of many others who have been made to feel that they should be grateful for what amounts to babysitting. So many stories of parents going to talk to their local primary school and prior to getting past reception you are made to feel your child will not be accepted let alone welcomed, they just want to get rid of you. The reason often these attitudes persist is that no parent wants to send their child to a school where they will not be cared for as a person, despite that technically they could fight this, they often simply do not have the energy or time to make a point. Hence most parents take the hint and keep searching often by word of mouth for an institution that will care for their children even if the fit is not right. Yet others have given up altogether on the education system and turned to home schooling so that their children will learn.

The provisions and choices in High School are not only limited but worse than in primary school specially for those children in the Gap between special units and mainstream. By the Gap area I refer to those children

who are not sufficiently disabled to require a solely special needs environment, and may with some assistance participate on a part time or selective basis in mainstream.

Many of us face the choice of applying for one of the very limited spots in a special needs High School which can have cut off points based on psychometric testing. Should our children not be eligible due to the result they face very limited choices, if any. We often keep our children in special primary schools were their educational potential is maximised to then have it significantly reduced after all the years of family struggle. Getting a transition spot ranges from really hard to impossible.

Even within the very few High Schools who have made room for our children, through the provision of a special unit, there is a system not conducive to fostering their independence by assisting in their inclusion in academic subjects should they be capable. The system is not designed to bridge the gap between the much-modified syllabus in the special unit and the life skills in the mainstream unit. Having discussed the issue with many High School teachers with extensive experience they have all said that they have not seen this gap ever well bridged. Teachers simply do not have sufficient time and often training to modify the curriculum to maximise the benefit to these children in the gap area.

After all the effort and hardship associated with the early education of our children it is heartbreaking, that should they have a special talent or be capable of integration socially, even if not academically, that the level of provision is so limited or in most cases is absent from the High School environment.

If you do not make the transition prior to High School, which is premature in some circumstances, our children are relegated to significantly reduced opportunities rather than slowly ramping off assistance which would maximise their potential for independence at the completion of High School.

Our sole aim as a family has been to make our children as independent as possible yet High School does not facilitate their continued growth and aims of independence. It is sink or swim and support is significantly and abruptly reduced rather than gradually removed to foster their independence.

The number of applications in the few special schools and units in mainstream schools, far exceeds the supply in the metropolitan area, despite fees which in some cases are considerable. Parents often make substantial sacrifices for their very special children, yet we are not supported with sufficient provisions.

Although we're able to choose the educational institutions for our typically developing children the same choice is not available to our special needs children, in their case we are made to feel that we should be grateful for a spot at all. Parents must compete for the few spots, when often it is other parents who have helped us survive our circumstances. They who face more than their fair share of challenges in life in fact have less support and provisions than their more able siblings.

The situation is such that I have been moved to write and to express my deep concerns with your committee so that you may understand our predicament and that of many other families who share our circumstances.

Your sincerely

Evangelina Martinez