

**Submission
No 421**

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

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Date received: 2 June 2017

Supplementary Submission

By Vanessa Comiskey

Dear Parliamentarians,

First of all thank you for allowing me to appear at the parliamentary hearing in Shellharbour and for making me feel like what I have to say is important and worth listening too. Since my appearance at the parliamentary hearing I realised that I didn't answer a couple of questions that I would have liked to due to being overwhelmed by emotions on the day and or I partially answered and would like to now add more commentary too. I have also included some extra commentary at the end as it covers other points that I feel are also important. I do apologise if it is a bit lengthy, I have tried to keep it short.

- 1.) The Honourable John Graham asked about what I think would make a difference to the attitudes in schools and what is the way out?

My answer: Start by getting the right people in to the education department and schools, there are so many bad apples being left in charge of our system that seem to think that they know what is best and fail to listen to parents like myself that are more than willing to work with the schools and the department to ensure ALL kids get a fair go. Principals really do make or break the school. If the principal is a bully or is ignorant or have the "I don't care" attitude, which then it impacts on the culture of the school. I have noticed that the way in which the principal behaves and talks impacts on how the teachers behave and teach students. I will give you an example of what I mean by this (because I love examples), I have a child that goes to a school that used to have a really horrible reputation and be one of the worst schools in the district and I can tell you that it used to have some really huge problems with bullying and students misbehaving and a huge absenteeism issue etc and this school has managed to turned itself right around and has not only become a good school with a great reputation but it also has increased rates of attendance and managed to overcome the issues that it once had that gave the school a bad reputation.

Over eighteen months ago I asked the then relieving principal (who is now the official principal) how the school was able to completely turn itself around and do you know what he told me, he said that over a number of years the school was blessed with two very good principals that were both very engaged and interested in turning the school around and really helping the students for the better. He believed that without those principals doing what they

did the school probably wouldn't have turned itself around. So this is a prime example of how principals can either make or break a school.

Also the system needs to start making people in charge accountable and responsible for their attitudes and actions and put things into place that will make the schools and department more accountable e.g. I noticed that there has been talk on previous evidence about an external body for parents etc to report too instead of the department and I agree there needs to be one put into place but I am not sure if the Ombudsman would be the best option unless they change the criteria for people to access them, for example my sons case wasn't something that the ombudsman was able to really help with because it didn't fall under the abuse category but was more about a failure by the system. Currently there is NO incentive for teachers and principals to change their attitudes or any real consequences either.

Also another frustration I have come across is the lack of interest and care by politicians themselves. In my opening statement I talked about a top down approach starting at the very top of our political system and when I said that I was referring to the fact that politicians themselves tend to either brush parents off because they are "too busy" to care to engage with parents and advocates that go to them for help e.g. latest example "Barnaby Joyce" or they do what they did to me when I approached them and end up sending you a whole heap of spin about throwing money at the problem or they just refer you back to the department of education that were of no use in the first place, or they don't even bother to respond to your emails or phone calls. Now I don't know if half of you realise just how inaccessible most of you are to the general public, particularly when you cannot even get a simple question responded to via social media let alone via an email and if you realise that even the attitudes of politicians tend to impact on the system. If the people at the very top are full of ignorance and or denial then how do you expect things to change overall in this country?

Politicians from a state and federal level need to ensure that when people like my-self come to them for help they actually get in and do whatever they in order to assist and engage with communities and the people that voted for them. Where are people supposed to go if no one will listen to them and take their complaints and concerns seriously or even get their questions answered? I need you to know that when people like me go out of our way in order to contact politicians it isn't because we haven't got anything better to do with our lives it means that we need HELP. Politicians themselves seem to not even be accountable for their attitudes and behaviours these days so how on earth can we expect a culture change in the

department and schools when the leaders of our country don't even know how to lead by example?

You know what really gets to me about people and their attitudes? It is the fact that people just cannot begin to appreciate the level of hard work, time and energy that we as carers/parents/advocates have put into our kids with disabilities just to get by on a day to day basis and a lot of the time without any respite and/or family supports. For me, I had years worth of fighting just for my son in order to get a diagnosis in order to satisfy the schools and the department of education and then finally once I got the diagnosis, I was basically handed a few pieces of paper telling me what I already knew about my child and sent on my way. From that moment on, I had to suddenly turn myself into an autism expert and an advocate without any idea as to what I was doing or who I could reach out to. The whole situation was entirely left up to me to sort out and go looking for supports and information and do research on autism, and then from there on in, I then had to figure out how in the world I was going to navigate the education system (which is far from transparent and accountable) again with no assistance unless I went out of my way to talk to people and again find all of the information out on my own and on top of that I then had to suddenly stand up and fight for his education and any chance at a future for him, give me strength! Let's also not forget those parents/carers who need to continually find and follow up with intense interventions and therapies for their children in order for them to function on a day to day basis and have to now learn to navigate a now more complex system due to the introduction of a badly planned and thought out NDIS that was not made in consultation of the key stakeholders themselves e.g. people with disabilities or their parents/carers.

From where I am standing our education is clearly being run by people that probably have very little to no idea as to what it is like to be a parent/carer of kids with special needs and they run you so far into the ground that you physically feel like you cannot fight anymore. To make it even worse, when you are completely beaten down and exhausted and you end up having no choice but to reach out to politicians for some help, you just end up getting palmed off! Maybe, just maybe, if people like yourselves go out and interact with your communities and ask people with special needs kids, what their day to day life entails and how much that impacts on them and their families you would maybe have a real change in attitude and start to appreciate the uphill battles that us as parent/carers have! If you want to change attitudes then you as leaders need to start the dialogue and start to really listen to what we have to say and continue on with that dialogue. Knowledge is power and it's amazing just how quickly

you can manage to change a person's ignorance once people are actually willing enough to be open and take the time to listen to what is being said. I also need you to realise just how disempowered and angry it makes us feel as parents/carers when we do all we can to give our kids an education and the system fails them in the most horrific ways and then the people responsible for it NEVER ever gets held accountable and therefore there is no justice. This is something that I know that I will have in the back of my mind for the rest of my life alongside so many other families. We as parents/carers put our blind trust and faith in the schools to do the right thing and for what? Just for our kids to be pushed to the brink of suicide because they cannot be looked after and get treated so appallingly that the children themselves feel that they feel like they mean nothing what so ever to those schools, the department and the government? Tell me how is that okay?

Another way is to really ensure that kids with disabilities are included 110% in all schools, and I am sure that after reading the submissions you all know about some schools intentionally excluding kids with disabilities out of general everyday activities and excursions and special occasions because the teachers and principals find them "too hard" to deal with and again they get away with it. No one holds them accountable. It is blatant discrimination but when parents speak up and try to fight back their pleas fall on deaf ears.

2.) The Honourable John Graham asked: What can we do for parents that haven't built those links or made those connections that I have made?

My answer: I think that it is important for the schools to be working closely with advocacy services which should have a large amount of information available for parents/carers in order for them to make those links. I find that schools are bound by the amount of information that they are allowed to put on school newsletters and I am also aware that advocacy services aren't always involved with schools unless they specifically get asked by a parent or someone else to be involved. For the longest time I didn't even know there were advocacy services around and I am also aware that a lot of other people aren't informed about them either. For years I could have had an advocate attend meetings with me and all the rest of it but again I wasn't informed of this service or my rights to access this service and that I could use them to help fight for my son's rights. I would be happy to share my information with advocacy services about the communities that I know are available to parents/carers etc. Help get the word out by using those services that are there for support and advice etc, get the schools in partnership with them.

Let me add more to this by saying that the other issue lies with the fact that there are not enough advocacy services around especially in regional areas and the government needs to help with that. I know that years ago when I finally found out that my area had an advocacy service, I also quickly found out that the one service based in my town only had 2 or 3 staff and only one of them was full time (the manager) and they were expected to cover vast distances around the region because of the lack of services and funding available to create the services.

- 3.) The Honourable John Graham asked- How do we get the word out to the parents who are able to advocate in the way in which you do that bits of the system are working and responding well and that the teachers have the knowledge to get the system into other schools?

My answer: I know I partially answered this question but I wanted to add extra commentary to it. I feel that it is a complex issue but it would also be beneficial if the media engaged in some of the communication and getting the word out there. I know that some mainstream media sources do stories on education and other countries school systems all the time but you don't normally hear good news about some of the stuff that may be happening in Australian schools. Also another suggestion would be to get the schools P&C committees involved in spreading the word although that could prove difficult if your school doesn't have one and I have heard that some schools do not have a P&C because they cannot get enough parents involved or to volunteer their time.

- 4.) Mr David Shoe Bridge asked: You see, In Parliamentary inquiries we get parents like you who are highly motivated and articulate. Obviously you are the parents who contest and advocate for your kids. But there are many other kids whose parents do not have the capacity to do what you do. In your observation, what do you see happening with them?

My answer: Thanks for the compliment and I know that I partially answered that question at the hearing but would like to now add in more commentary. My response is that in my observations kids who are not advocated for are often left to fall to the way side and end up with little education and or very little opportunities for a future. I have a close friend who is a retired teacher she lives in a neighbourhood, where she informs me that there is a neighbourhood full of kids right around her that she knows to have learning disabilities, behavioural issues, and or other problems that are not being addressed at schools when and if

they attend. The parents often feel powerless and don't bother to send them to school regularly, even when the department of education or the principal or police turn up to force the issue, because they know all too well that the minute the kids get to school they will be sent home and or suspended. These kids are roaming the streets almost every single day during school hours and getting themselves into all sorts of mischief, all the while missing out on an education. She described one boy to me that she has regular contact with that is clearly bright and has a lot of potential but the schools simply cannot handle him because of his behaviours and if they don't end up expelling him, he will often end up suspended or sent home in a matter of hours even if he goes to school. She tells me that this child is so far behind that she is not real sure as to how he will be able to attend high school and he is already nearing the end of primary school. So where do I think kids like this will end up? Most likely on the wrong side of the law, in juvenile justice or adult prisons and or on drugs and or having to seek government payments for the rest of their lives, simply because they weren't able to get an education that will help them to seek employment. In all honesty the kids that are failed by the system will be the government's future punching bags that they can blame everything on. These kids will be the ones who get labelled as "dole bludgers" and "no hoppers" and will be left to fend for them-selves in a world where if you don't have an education you don't go anywhere. The kids that are failed by the system will be the ones that the government will be paying for, for the rest of their lives! And do you know what the most heartbreaking part is? EACH individual child has the potential to learn and thrive but a lot of the time schools just simply put them in the too hard basket and forget about them!

Extra Commentary:

Ever since I appeared at the parliamentary inquiry I have been overwhelmed by the amount of parents/carers/advocates from different parts of Australia that have contacted me and have been reaching out to me. They are not only thanking me for speaking out and being a voice, but also sharing their stories with me and offering their assistance in order to get something done. A lot of people have been telling me that they feel like they don't have a voice and they are still being ignored by the schools, the department of education and government ministers when they have been reaching out for help. Some of the stories I am being told are absolutely horrific and there is an occurring theme of powerlessness and hopelessness amongst the parents/carers saying that no one is listening and no one cares. There are so many families out there that need help and nothing is being done. We need government ministers and people in power to start paying attention and stop fobbing parents/carers/advocates off! Both State and

Federal Ministers are ignoring the issues that are pushing so many families to the brink. There are so many desperate mums and dads out there that just want an education for their children but due to abuse, discrimination, bullying, isolation etc their children are now left traumatised and unable to function normally let alone learn. Something needs to change and fast! I need you all to understand that I am telling you this because I know exactly what they are all talking about and they are coming to me because I GET IT and I am willing to listen to what they have to say! From personal experience there is nothing worse than being stuck in your own personal hell to which there is no escape and then being made to feel like you have no absolutely no power and your voice doesn't matter to anyone. Do you understand how much that can impact on a person's psychological well being when the very people in the highest positions of this country continue to fail to use that power to better people's lives? I want to beg and plead with every single politician in this country to hear what I am saying! I need to reach out to you all and say you know what, what good are you in your job if you cannot even push the point and protect innocent and vulnerable kids from harm and give kids a fair and equal education and a right to a future?! What good are you as politicians if you are just going to stand there and watch this happen to people? I am sorry but I cannot stand by anymore and watch on while more kids and families lives are destroyed! I beg you! HELP these kids! I will go to the ends of the earth to fight for these kids and these families because every day I live and breathe the consequences of what has happened to my child! Hear my voice! I will stop at NOTHING to continue this fight especially if nothing substantial comes from this inquiry and kids continue to be abused and are not looked after. I will go to any lengths to rally as many people behind me as I can in order to get something done and given the amounts of people contacting me I can assure you it won't take too much effort on my part. This has got to stop! I am sorry if this offends you but it needed to be said. What is it going to take to get some serious changes within our education system that is failing so many? Kids with disabilities have just as much right as anyone to both an education and a future, when are people going to understand that?!

You know, I asked my son what is the one thing that he thinks would have made his schooling experiences much better and he told me that it would have been better if he had been made to feel valued! I asked him to expand on what he meant by that and he told me that all of those times, when he felt like he was being ignored in the classroom by either teachers or teachers assistants who he could clearly tell could see that he was struggling but he didn't have the words or the confidence to ask for help, made him feel like he was not of

value to anyone. My son wants all of you to know that ALL kids are valuable and he doesn't want to see any other children treated like he was and would like all of you to do your very best to help those kids.

A perfect example of making a child feel valued is when my son had a recent short visit from one of his teachers from distance education recently and this teacher who just happens to have forty years experience, was meeting my son for the very first time (because she is a new teacher for him this year) and she did the most remarkable thing that I think all teachers should do with kids with disabilities, the teacher fully engaged with him and asked him lots of questions and really listened to what he had to say and really showed a genuine interest. The teacher also took the time to explain to my son anything he wasn't sure about and reassured him. To top it off she even brought my son down some extra reading material for him to read just because she thought he would enjoy it! Now my son was only with her for just under an hour and he walked away with a smile from ear to ear! If you want to know how you bring the best out of kids with disabilities, you do exactly what his teacher did and what other teachers in Distance Education have done for my child and other children, you make them feel valued! A lot of teachers and principals have no idea as to how to make a child with disabilities feel valued let alone how to fully listen or engage with them.

Speaking of distance education, I spoke to the teacher that visited my son about my appearance at the parliamentary inquiry etc and how kids are often being denied distance education and she told me that just this year they have had to cut back on staff and staff hours because the numbers are down. The teacher told me that they have the capacity and the staff to cater to so many more kids and yet here they are cutting back because numbers are down. Now I cannot even begin to tell you how upset that makes me considering I am aware (as are you) about kids being denied access to the program one way or another! This program is such a brilliant program and I feel that there are so many kids and families out there that can benefit, so why are numbers down? Maybe that would be worth investigating further? Happy to share the name of the school in confidence if anyone would like to know which school it is.

Now let's talk about Gonski, I would love nothing more than to see ALL schools be on the same level and see ALL kids getting an equal and fair education that my own son was denied BUT I am greatly concerned that IF and when it rolls out, the government won't implement it properly and or will start cutting it back on it because they (as usual) suddenly realise that

they haven't budgeted properly for it or had "budget blowout" just like what is already happening with the NDIS! I say this because I am involved in a number of communities in regards to the NDIS (no surprises there) and a lot of people are already having a horrible time trying to access the most basic things from it and the insane language that is required from people just to be able to request things is not at all meant to make life easier for people with disabilities and I have also been talking to and hearing stories from providers and some of the stuff is enough to make anyone greatly concerned. Gonski and the NDIS are only about as valuable as the people running the show and if the people behind it don't do it right then what would have been the point? I want Gonski to work but I have very little faith in our governments to do it properly given their past histories of bad management.

Another interesting thing in relation to education funding is that I believe it won't solve the situation unless it is spent correctly and used on the right things. Let me give you an example (because again I love examples), I was speaking to a highly educated medical specialist about broken and inadequate systems here in Australia recently during an appointment (as you do) and I just happened to get onto the problems of the education system and the parliamentary inquiry and he told me something very interesting that I feel would be of some use. The specialist told me that a few years back the Australian National University did a comparison study on the literacy and numeracy levels of kids in 1965 right up until the time of the study and they found that even though funding levels had increased by 250% since 1965, the literacy and numeracy levels of kids were still better in 1965 compared to when the study was completed. Shocking yes?! The specialist couldn't quite remember what year this comparison study was done but he assures me that you would be able to find it if you went looking for it, he remembered it because it was a real shock to him and thought it would be important to highlight to you parliamentarians. Isn't it just amazing what you find out when you proactively engage with and talk to people?! Don't ever under estimate the power of dialogue! If Gonski has any chance of succeeding then it must be implemented correctly and then improved upon as time goes on.

Now another thing the specialist also told me about is the fact that he has a daughter who is a qualified teacher and his daughter did some time over in England as a teacher for a number of years and then eventually came home to Australia and started teaching back here. The specialist told me that she said to him that our education system here is so very slack and we have a lot to learn from other countries in terms of how to run schools etc. It turns out that in Britain their education system was worse than ours here and they managed to turn it around

by doing a number of things, one of which was making people accountable and getting parents etc more involved in the education of their children. The other thing I found interesting was that they apparently looked at the private education model there and took what was working from the private sector and applied it into the public education system and their education system is far better than ours now. So basically the advice here is don't think that Gonski/money is going to solve everything unless the people running the system are prepared to roll up their sleeves and actually put in the hard work and the effort to change the system for the better.

I would also like to add in some commentary on the fact that I am fully aware that kids can be suspended from school for up to twenty days at the discretion of a school principal at any given time and I think that it is absolutely wrong that the appeal process can also take up to twenty days to process and therefore schools/department of education can drag out the suspension/appeal for as long as possible if they are determined to have the kids out of school for that long no matter what the parents/carers think. Given that a lot of schools are also finding it easier to just suspend kids with disabilities or send them home because they are not interested in doing their jobs properly, I feel that it is highly unfair and it shouldn't be allowed to happen. Please do something about that. Twenty days to appeal a suspension of twenty days pretty much tells parents and kids that their rights and concerns mean very little to a system that is supposed to be helping them and again makes people feel absolutely powerless.

Anyway I think that is all I would like to cover in my supplementary submission and I sincerely thank you all very much for your time and for really listening to what myself and others have had to say about these issues. I sincerely hope that my personal contribution has been of some value to you all and has helped you to see not just some of the deep rooted systemic issues that people like my-self have are come up against time and time again but also the harsh reality that we as parents/carers/advocates experience every single day. I will be watching the rest of the hearings closely and I really look forward to seeing the state government's response to the inquiry in the hope that some fabulous recommendations are made and implemented for the sake of all kids with disabilities and for their families and if not you can be assured that I will be in contact with you all again in the near future. From my son and my entire family, thank you for finally giving us an opportunity to speak out and have our voices heard, it means more to us than you could ever realise. I am holding out hope that in the near future things may improve and or start to head in the right direction because

as always I believe that it is possible as all kids are capable of becoming the best that they can be no matter their disability if they are assisted and treated in ways that it allows them to thrive and reach their potential. Again it's all about people's attitudes! Kind Regards,
Vanessa Comiskey.