

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

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

Initial submission lodged 29 May 2017

I am a parent of an 11-year-old boy in a NSW primary school. He has mild autism and ADHD both diagnosed at age 6. Due to insufficient learning support throughout his schooling and despite recommendations from health professionals informing the types of supports he needs, consequently he has fallen significantly behind, predominantly in literacy, he has low self-esteem and he hates school. This has resulted in challenging behaviours, which have resulted in a number of suspensions from school. Many of these behaviours are consistent with autism and ADHD. Suspension has not been an effective strategy for my child who does not want to go to school. Further, my child's health professionals have in writing to the school, expressed that suspension is inappropriate for him given that he is vulnerable. In addition, I am a single working parent and the sole provider and therefore suspension puts an enormous pressure on me in this regard and exacerbates an already stressful family situation.

Data from around the world show that children with disability are over-represented in school suspension data. However, the NSW Department of Education does not collect disability information amongst those who are suspended. In addition, suspension is not an effective behaviour modifier and further marginalises students who already find school incredibly difficult. There is no evidence to support the use of suspension in these children and it is discouraged in both the autism and ADHD literature. Suspension also results in these children having a negative school record and leading to further prejudice in the school enrolment selection process, specifically in out of area placements.

I am also aware anecdotally of many families of children with disability in mainstream schools who have changed schools in their quest for better support and inclusion. The NSW Department of Education does not publish data on the proportion of children with disability who change schools during their schooling (i.e., from one primary to another, not primary to secondary)

Inclusion of children with disability and equity in education cannot be achieved without the data being collected and evaluated so that unconscious and conscious bias can be addressed and that KPIs of individual schools can be compared and benchmarking and best practice can be implemented. These data need to be collected. These data should be made public. Currently principals have absolute power and no accountability because no one is looking at the data.

Supplementary submission lodged 18 June 2017

Inappropriate use of suspension:

- In justifying suspension in response to my child's challenging behaviours, the principal told me the suspensions were necessary to provide evidence to support his access request for additional support. Why should my child need to be suspended to access additional support? It is his right to get support without being excluded.

-Children in out of home care have 7 x the rate of suspension than children in home care. The data is shown in US data to be similar for children with disability compared with children without disability and is likely to be similar in NSW. It is critical for these data to be collected and evaluated to stop this discrimination.

In trying to give a perspective to the use of suspension or exclusion by detention in my child with mild ASD and ADHD, consider the following comparison with a child with asthma:

- Consider my child who has ASD and ADHD. Typical features of his ASD include refusal, not working well in groups, sensory issues, difficulty communicating his needs at times. Features of his ADHD include poor working memory, slow processing speed, poor attention. All these things make him very tired. He frequently doesn't sleep well, exacerbating these symptoms. He has bad days and better days and occasionally good days. Imagine there were too many stimuli to process, making it difficult to concentrate, the provoking stimuli overwhelming and his response being dysregulated, resulting in symptoms of refusal and low level disruption. The lesson/excursion is affected. My son is put on detention and is threatened with suspension. An outcome that has happened on several occasions. I have also been told he may not be permitted to attend school camp as he was disruptive on a recent excursion (he happened to be getting sick and couldn't cope). I pointed out that on the excursion prior to that he had a fantastic day.
- Now consider for comparison purposes, a child with asthma. Asthma is a condition where the airways have an abnormal (dysregulated) inflammatory response to provoking stimuli causing the airways to narrow and producing symptoms of cough, wheeze and/ or shortness of breath. Imagine a child with asthma whose preventative medication has not worked or which he has not complied with, has an asthma attack in class or during an excursion, causing disruption to the lesson/event. The teacher puts the child on detention for the disruption and threatened to exclude the child from future events. Imagine the uproar if this would occur.

Data collection and reporting:

The Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (the national data collection) aims over time, to provide nationally consistent, high quality data on:

- students who receive an adjustment to participate in education because of disability enrolled in Australian schools
- where these students are located
- the level of reasonable adjustment provided to assist them to participate in schooling on the same basis as other students
- each student's broad category of disability.

The data collection is limited and flawed.

- It relies on subjective information from schools about level of reasonable adjustment, however there are no data being collected about the effectiveness of the adjustments and whether the parents or students consider the adjustments to be reasonable or adequate. Data must be collected from parents for a balanced view.
- The data being collected on enrolment is point in time and does not reflect the change of enrolment that frequently occurs in this student sub-group. What is needed is to determine the proportion of students changing in enrolments and the number of times this occurs in a learning stage to evaluate the representation this group of students amongst these data compared with students without special needs. Further, these data need to be compared between schools so that schools with high turnover of students can be targeted to address deficiencies in support implementation and schools achieving well can be used as models for best practice. In approximately 2013, I attended a Positive Partnerships 2-day workshop for parents (of children with ASD). The take-home message I walked away with was that, most attendees had, had to change their child's school for inadequate support and/or unsatisfactory practices. This strengthened my resolve to stay in the current school where my child had established social connections and advocate for support on his behalf.

Annual school reports

I'm unsure if there are specific criteria dictated by the NSW Department of Education, that must be reported in school annual reports. I know from my son's school, that every year they summarise the school demographics by sex and ethnicity as well as indigenous student composition, however they do not report on proportion or category of children with disability. In approximately 2014-2015, I asked the principal of my son's school how many children with a confirmed disability are enrolled in the school. She said "I have no idea". A principal who is committed to inclusion would have an idea.

School leadership and culture

The leadership and culture of the school cannot be underestimated in this discussion. It is absolutely the most important factor for inclusive education regardless of adequate resources or not, regardless of policy and the "Every School, Every Student" Framework. It is more important that learning outcomes being achieved. You cannot instil inclusive culture in policy. Having read some of the hearing transcripts in this inquiry, I noted culture has been a discussion point by witnesses and members of the committee.

A principal who instils a culture of inclusion in a school is a principal who shows genuine warmth to the children and their parents, a principal who is welcoming and approachable. A principal who has genuine commitment to problem solving with students and their parents in difficult situations and a principal who does not insist trying to fit a square peg in a round hole. The Principal of Marrickville West Public is one such principal who makes her students feel safe. Her students want to give her a hug. She makes inclusion a priority. Principals like

her should be role models for other schools. I am sure that the 'student turnover' will be lower than many other schools. Policy and frameworks cannot determine or develop culture. Whilst culture cannot be directly measured, markers of inclusive culture can be by looking at KPIs such as de-enrolment. Qualitative measures can be sought from teaching staff and parents alike.

An integrated approach to support is required

For children, such as my son, the teaching staff of the Department of Education have repeatedly shown to be lacking in skills, knowledge and experience in providing adequate support and have admitted as such. I have at my own cost sought support from speech therapists, OTs, psychologists and more recently I employed a (QLD based) teacher with a Masters in Psychology who specialises in behaviour to provide support to my son's school. However, the school my son attends has not usually been open to receiving such external supports. It is obvious that there is a need for a multi-agency approach to supporting these children. There is a role for the Department of Health and the Department of Family and Social Services to be working with Education to provide the best outcomes for children with disability.

The need for reverse discrimination in the enrolment policy

As commonly known, only the local area school is obliged to accept a child's enrolment. However, the local school is often not an appropriate setting for a child with special needs, who may have their needs best met by an out of area school. This may be due to factors such as: single sex versus co-ed schools, types of subjects that are offered, community support network, size of the school, special programs offered and a multitude of other factors. However, many school principals' cherry pick their out of area enrolments and do not want children with additional needs, who may bring their academic rating down or who will demand too many resources. Applying for out of area enrolments is akin to applying for a job. Schools want NAPLAN results and records of achievements, copies of school reports, all of which children with disability and particularly developmental disabilities don't generally do so well. Children with disability are discriminated against in this selection process but this is dressed up in a standard reply as 'sorry you are out of area'. For this reason, there are grounds for a mandatory quota of children with special needs/disability in out of area enrolments.