

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

Organisation: Action For People With Disability Inc

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Submission

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Prepared by: Christine Agius, Executive Officer
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Due to the late date of our submission we will provide a brief summary of some of our experience of supporting students with disability who are working towards and then undertaking Higher School Certificate examinations. In provision of advocacy for these students for over 30 years it is disappointing, given other achievements and forward progress for people with disability during this time, to report the lack of progress of including students with disability. These students should have their specific individual support needs met to afford them the opportunity of full education leading to rewarding employment, lack of dependence on Centrelink payments and an increased quality of life.

Our experience of supporting these students has demonstrated the lack of knowledge of human rights conventions and Federal and State discrimination legislation by staff of NSW schools and their lack of commitment to pursuing the meeting of individual needs of students with disability in adherence with these conventions and legislation.

One example is the year 11 Critical Thinking Test to be held on 11th August, 2017 with this being an optional test. Requests for provisions for a student with individual vision impairment support needs were dismissed and the student was advised that she could work quietly in the library whilst the other Year 11 students at her school, as will be 17,000 other students in NSW, undertaking this optional test. The data from this test is to be used by this student's school to guide teachers to improve teaching and learning in the classroom.

At the student's family's request and reiteration of request, the staff of the school made further enquiries of NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) and were advised by NESA that this individual student's support needs would not be met to ensure her equity of access to the test. Given the assurances previously provided that NESA would provide support for students with disability support needs, this response was dismaying for the student and her family.

The family and school have now worked together to afford some lesser opportunity for this student to undertake this test, but certainly not with optimum and equal opportunity and access.

In supporting a number of students with disability who are undertaking HSC examinations, it was apparent that some staff of schools find it extremely difficult to support the aspirations of students with disability and to accept the need to have allowances made for them to undertake assessments, reviews and exams.

For a number of teaching staff, including staff who have been specifically appointed to the role of supporting students with disability through these processes, their personal views and beliefs preclude them from appropriately supporting students to reach their potential and realise their ambitions of tertiary education.

Families report being viewed as unrealistic in pursuing the opportunity of their family member sitting the HSC examinations and supporting their family member pursuing specific University studies.

Staff were at times reluctant to pursue Board of Studies, Teaching and Education Standards (BOSTES) for the specific allowances required for Year 12 students sitting their HSC exams and often stated that this process is too difficult to undertake.

Families often report their repeated requests being dismissed until they are too exhausted to continue despite their commitment to their child and his or her education. Families who know of the assistance available will request the support of an experienced Advocate who then attends school meetings and informs teaching staff of what has previously been allowed to ensure that students have the best outcomes in undertaking their HSC examinations.

As an Advocate in these situations, you often have to first educate and or change the views of the teaching staff prior to advocating for the student. At times, it is necessary to inform the Principal of the school of the difficulties being encountered with responses varying between schools, despite the provision of detailed reports from

professionals including medical practitioners, treating specialists, therapists, audiologists and ophthalmologists.

Some schools have refused to send on the reports of these specialists based on their previous attempts to have BOSTES criteria met. For one student, following my pursuing of multiple allowances and then appealing the decision, BOSTES convened a second assessment of a number of specialists reports on the eve of an examination, resulting in an imposition of further stress for that student who had multiple diagnoses, including anxiety disorder.

Students report having to contend with the attitude of some teaching staff and fellow students that BOSTES allowances had afforded them an advantage over their fellow students without disability support needs. One student recently told her parents of suicidal thoughts following a fellow student's bullying of her in this regard. Some families have reported their family member deciding not to sit the HSC examinations or of deciding to study a subject at a lower level due to the bullying and resulting imposition of stress.

Students have also reported being questioned or being "interrogated" by teaching staff who have reluctantly agreed to implement the allowances for school based assessments and tests that they previously agreed at meetings with family members and Advocate.

It is vital for all schools and every member of staff to be aware of this bullying and take all steps to ensure the physical safety and emotional wellbeing of students with disability. Students without disability need to be informed of the exhaustive process of gaining NESA allowances and the resulting stress impacting on their fellow students with disability.

Teaching staff must also be aware of the varying levels of needs for students with the same diagnosis of disability, and not impose generalist supports based on personal views.

The pressure of supporting a student with disability without appropriate response or support from schools and teaching staff has resulted in difficulties and stress for parents and at times in family breakdown.

Whilst BOSTES criteria were reviewed and found to be appropriate, we expect that NESA will be more flexible and demonstrate a commitment to meeting all of the individual specific support needs of every student with disability.

ACTION is appreciative of this inquiry and the opportunity of input, albeit a very brief summary, and would be pleased to provide all individual information and details referred to in our submission following receipt of consent of individual people with disability.