INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY IN NEW SOUTH WALES EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

Name: Name suppressed

Date Received: 26 February 2024

To: The Secretariat

Portfolio Committee 3, Legislative Council,

NSW Parliament House

6 Macquarie Street

Sydney NSW 2000

26 February 2024

Dear Members of the Inquiry Committee,

I am writing to submit an independent response to the **Children and Young People with Disability in New South Wales Educational Settings' Inquiry**. As a concerned parent, I have taken this opportunity not only to advocate for my child, who will be completing his studies this year, but also for the broader student community facing challenges within the educational system.

This submission addresses each of the terms of reference; except that of C, H, K, L, N, O and P as I am basing this submission on my firsthand experiences and knowledge. Within these pages, you will find thoughtful recommendations associated with each term, derived from the comprehensive content provided.

Throughout my child's schooling journey, I have encountered numerous obstacles that remain unaddressed, hindering the achievement of meaningful results. It is my hope that this submission sheds light on these issues and contributes to positive changes for all students with disabilities.

I appreciate your attention to these critical matters and remain committed to fostering positive change within our educational system.

Sincerely,

Introduction

(HS), situated in North-Western Sydney, was established in 2005 with an initial enrolment of 490 students. Over the years, it has experienced significant growth, now serving a student body of approximately 1500 from Year 7 to Year 12.

The school's reputation has faced scrutiny in recent times, notably due to a stabbing incident in 2021, which garnered widespread media attention. Despite these challenges, HS has expanded its infrastructure, including the construction of new buildings. The school's strategic location near the   suburb has led to high demand for enrolments, as   does not have a dedicated high school within its immediate vicinity.

HS boasts a Specialised Learning Hub (the support unit), catering to students with diverse needs. According to the school's Prospectus 2023, this hub provides 31 student placements, organised through a district-level placement panel process. Notably, the hub accommodates 21 students with Autism and 10 with moderate Intellectual disability (IO).

Term of reference

(a) *The experiences of children and young people within educational settings and measures to support students with disability*

Response to this TOR

- Current policies inadequately identify students who could benefit from extended learning opportunities.
- IEPs often remain static and tokenistic, failing to recognise students' multifaceted abilities
- Limited collaboration with external services (e.g., speech therapists, psychologists) hinders a holistic approach
- Students in support units face disbelief and scrutiny. I have examples of this, such as the school not believing that my child had been injured during sport and later finding out that he had to wear a moon boot for 8 weeks, my child not being believed that he saw two teachers coming out of the support unit's bathroom giggling, only to find out years later that these two teachers were in a relationship, my child not being believed that a teacher threw a book at him, and during the investigation only interviewing the teacher and an aid who was not present instead of interviewing another student whom was present during incident.
- Once placed in a support unit, students often remain there regardless of changing abilities.
- Students are excluded from mainstream activities, including leadership roles.
- Sporting achievements by students with disabilities go unrecognised. For example, my son won many medals for athletics in the disability sector. These medals count towards the high school's goals however he was not recognised as a school representative.

Recommendations:

- Implement robust identification processes that consider diverse abilities. Regularly review and extend learning plans based on individual progress.

- Revise IEPs regularly, acknowledging students' strengths and providing tailored support. Avoid confining students to specific units solely based on their initial placement.
- Holistic approach to students' learning by fostering partnerships with external professionals.
- Investigate incidents thoroughly, involving all relevant witnesses. Validate students' experiences; create trust, create change.
- Allow flexibility based on individual progress and needs.
- Encourage participation in extracurricular activities, leadership positions, and school events, this promotes inclusion.
- Celebrate all achievements. Acknowledge medals won in the disability sector as valuable contributions to the school's goals.
- Provide targeted professional development for teachers in support units. Focus on understanding the diverse aspects of Autism and intellectual disability.
- Teachers to be aware of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, in particular Standard 1 education working with students with disabilities and Standard 7 collaboration and communication with parents and other stakeholders[1]

Term of reference

(b) the barriers to safe, quality and inclusive education for children with disability in schools, early childhood education services and other educational settings

Response to this TOR

- the present barriers are that of resistance to change.
- Having a set view of the learning hub and student's disabilities
- Culture of the school and the views they have on students with disabilities, this filters down from leadership to students.
- Mainstream leadership not valuing and seeing the support unit as part of the school.

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[1] [1] [The Standards | NSW Education Standards](#)

- Parents of children without disabilities may have mixed feelings about inclusion.
- Negative attitudes can influence school policies and hinder full participation of children with disabilities.

Recommendations
- Provide specialised training for teachers in support units. Focus on understanding diverse aspects of disabilities.
- Equip teachers to work effectively with external professionals (e.g., therapists, psychologists).
- Foster partnerships between teachers, therapists, and families. A holistic approach ensures comprehensive support.
- Promote a culture that values inclusion. teachers, parents, and peers should champion the right of every child to participate fully.
- Avoid rigid structures that confine students solely based on initial assessments.
- Professional development for teachers pertaining to levels of disability.
- Inclusiveness of support unit in school activities, not just for Autism Day in April
- Recognise achievements of children with disabilities, whether in academics, sports, or social interactions.

Term of reference

(d) the impact on children and young people with disability and their families associated with inadequate levels of support.

Response to this TOR
- Inadequate support can hinder a students' educational progress.
- Students with disabilities feeling unwelcome, often experiencing exclusion.
- Students not feeling part of teams or part of the school setting.
- Students having to deal with isolation within the school setting resulting in depression and at times self-harm.
- Students' feeling unheard, their frustration can manifest as stress and behavioural issues.

- Parents/guardians tirelessly advocate for their children. Unfortunately, this advocacy is sometimes perceived as complaining.
- Parents/guardians having to seek outside support to assist with students' mental health as a result of how students have been treated by staff.
- Students may face challenges in securing employment.

Recommendations:
- Better communication between parents and teachers, working as a team.
- Holistic approach to a student's plan, rather than a tokenistic approach. Develop comprehensive plans that recognise students' strengths and challenges.
- Acknowledge students' strengths and work towards them being included in mainstream setting.
- Celebrate achievements, whether academic, social, or sporting, to boost students' self-esteem.

Term of reference

(e) The benefits for all children and young people if students with disability are provided with adequate levels of support.

Response to this TOR
- When students with disabilities receive appropriate support, they feel integrated into the school system.
- A sense of belonging enhances the overall school environment, fostering empathy and understanding among peers.
- Adequate support reduces stress and anxiety for students with disabilities.
- A healthier cohort positively impacts the entire student body, promoting well-being and resilience.
- Mainstream students interact with peers who have different needs.
- Exposure to diverse abilities cultivates empathy, breaks down stereotypes, and enriches social interactions.
- As students witness the capabilities and contributions of their peers with disabilities, their perceptions evolve.

- A more inclusive mindset leads to a compassionate and accepting school community.
- Perception of mainstream students towards students with a disability will be altered.

Recommendations:
- Regularly assess support unit practices. Ensure teachers receive specialised training to effectively support students.
- Move beyond tokenism. Recognise students' strengths and provide tailored assistance.
- Enable students in support units to participate in mainstream activities to the best of their abilities.
- Encourage collaboration between students across different settings.
- Support units to continue to be available for students, this is an invaluable resource, however, there needs to be a review of the processes and training teachers to be able to support students in the unit.

Term of reference

(f) the social, economic and personal benefits of improving outcomes for students with disability at school and in further education and employment.

Response to this TOR
- When students with disabilities feel they belong in educational settings, it fosters a culture of acceptance and understanding. Peers learn empathy, compassion, and the value of diversity.
- Inclusive environments provide opportunities for meaningful friendships and social connections. Students with disabilities interact with their peers, enhancing their social skills and overall well-being.
- Inclusion challenges stereotypes and reduces the stigma associated with disabilities. It promotes a more inclusive society where everyone is valued.

- Improved educational outcomes lead to better employment prospects. When students with disabilities receive quality education, they are better prepared for the workforce, contributing to economic productivity.
- Successful transitions from education to employment reduce reliance on social welfare programs.
- Students with disabilities gain a sense of independence, knowing they can contribute to society.
- Education equips students with essential life skills—communication, decision-making, and problem-solving—that empower them beyond the classroom.
- Improved outcomes lead to a higher quality of life. Access to education, employment, and social connections positively impacts mental and physical well-being.

Recommendations:

- Adherence to the Australian Teacher Professional Standards, Legislation and Guidelines, will guide and assist in the development of clear policies that promote inclusive education. These should address curriculum adaptations, teacher training, and accessibility standards.
- Individualised Education Plans (IEPs): Ensure that each student with a disability has a personalised IEP. **Regularly review** and update these plans based on progress and changing needs.
- Training for teachers on inclusive teaching practices.
- Teachers should learn effective collaboration techniques to work with other professionals (e.g., speech therapists, occupational therapists) and parents.
- Schools should be designed to accommodate all students. This includes ramps, elevators, accessible bathrooms, and sensory-friendly spaces.
- Employ trained support staff to work directly with students. They can provide one-on-one assistance and facilitate inclusion in mainstream classrooms.
- Schools should have dedicated special education teachers who collaborate with mainstream teachers and support students with disabilities, they should have specialised training if working in support unit.

Term of reference

(g) the experiences of teachers, early childhood educators, learning support staff and others with a role in educating children with disability and measures to adequately resource and empower those educators.

Response to this TOR

- Teachers to recognise that each child with a disability is unique. They need to adapt teaching methods, communication styles, and learning materials to meet individual needs. This personalised approach fosters a positive learning environment.

- Teachers to collaborate with other professionals, such as speech therapists, occupational therapists, and psychologists. They work together to create comprehensive support plans for students. Effective teamwork ensures holistic development.

- Teachers to create strong relationships with students. Being witness to a student's progress, celebrating achievements, and providing emotional support can be both fulfilling and emotionally demanding.

- Teachers advocate for inclusive practices within schools and the broader community. They strive to break down barriers and promote acceptance and understanding.

- Structure within the school setting to include the staff in the support units.

Recommendations:

- Continuous professional development and workshops equip teachers with updated knowledge and skills. Topics may include behaviour management, assistive technology, etc.

- Schools must allocate sufficient resources, including funding, specialised equipment, and support staff. Adequate staffing levels ensure that teachers can focus on teaching rather than administrative tasks.

- Establishing mentorship programs allows experienced educators to guide newer colleagues. Peer support networks provide a platform for sharing experiences and problem-solving.

- Teachers need access to resources and tools to be able to engage all students.

- Teachers require supervision, whether it is one on one with their mentor or supervisor; or in a group supervision setting; using reflective cycles such as Kolb's Reflective Practice[2]

Term of reference

(i) *the measures necessary to ensure the learning environment is safe and inclusive for all students, teachers and school support staff*

Response to this TOR

- Funding to schools and support units ensures that schools can provide the necessary resources for students with disabilities
- There needs to be infrastructure to support students with disabilities, such elevators, ramps, etc
- There needs to be ongoing training for teachers and staff in the support unit
- Fostering an atmosphere where everyone feels valued and respected
- Students to have self regulation techniques
- Provision of oportunties for students to work together and build on friendships, with students from mainstream

Recommendations:

- Buddy Systems: Pair students with disabilities with peer buddies who can offer social support, help with transitions, and promote inclusion.
- Conduct awareness sessions for students without disabilities to foster understanding and empathy.
- Parent-Teacher partnerships; involve parents in decision-making processes. Regular communication ensures alignment between home and school.
- Post-School options; start transition planning early. Explore post-school options such as further education, vocational training, or supported employment.
- Collaborate with local businesses to provide work experience opportunities for students with disabilities.
- Organise events that celebrate diversity and showcase students' talents.

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[2] Kolb's (1984) **cycle of reflective practice** is a model designed to help people learn from their experiences. It can be used as a basis for the structure of a reflective essay, or as a way to structure your thinking.

- Highlight achievements of students with disabilities.
- Recognise and appreciate efforts made by students, educators, and support staff in creating an inclusive environment.

Term of reference

(j) the impact of policies regarding suspensions and expulsions

Response to this TOR

- Suspensions and expulsions increase the risk of students with disabilities not returning tor school, therefore they fall behind in their studies.
- Exclusionary measures contribute to students' mental health decline, which will in turn ham their wellbeing and opportunities to engage in the community are diminished even further.
- Research shows that students with disabilities are more likely to be subjected to exclusionary discipline practices.[3]

Recommendations:

- Teachers to be continuously trained in behaviour management.
- Teachers to work in collaboration with other professionals involved.
- Make reasonable adjustments for students, a quiet room, visual reminders, social stories, etc.

Term of reference

(m) whether existing regulatory and oversight mechanisms are sufficient to protect and promote the rights of children and young people with disability, and protect those children and young people from abuse, neglect and exploitation

Response to this TOR

- Office of the Childrens Guardian (OCG); oversees child safety standards – the reportable conduct scheme.
- Department of Communities and Justice; Community Services (DCJ)

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[3] Pushed Out: Trends and Disparities in Out-of-School Suspension | Learning Policy Institute
Inside IES Research | Behavior and School Discipline for Students with Disabilities (ed.gov)

- The NDIS Quality and Standards Commission

- Professional and ethical Standards unit (PES)

- Students with disabilities are often not believed when making an allegation.

- The existing bodies responsible for safeguarding children with disabilities within a school setting often lack sufficient resources to thoroughly investigate every matter. Consequently, the burden of investigation frequently falls upon the individual school, which may lack the necessary training, resources, or impartiality to effectively address concerns related to potential abuse by teachers toward students with disabilities.

Recommendations:

- Allocation of adequate resources to schools when an allegation is made against a teacher.

- Trained investigators: trained staff (not necessarily teachers from the same school) to conduct investigations. This approach fosters transparency and impartiality.

- Consider the cumulative impact of repeated incidents, if there is a pattern of abuse towards students.

- Regular audits of allegations and investigations

- Publish annual reports on investigations; their outcomes and the improvements have been made to mitigate further abuse.