

Submission
No 40

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

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Date Received: 28 February 2024

Submission into the Inquiry into children and young people with disability in New South Wales Educational settings.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into Children and young people with disability in New South Wales educational settings. We welcome the Committee's interest in this important issue.

We both bring significant professional experience in public policy as both the CEO of AMA NSW and as a former President of the AMA and neurosurgeon in public and private practice. We are also blessed to be the parents of Matilda, aged 14 who has moderate to severe autism. Matilda attended St Lucy's School at Wahroonga for primary school and currently attends St Edmunds College, also in Wahroonga. We also have 3 other children who attend mainstream schools.

We have been pleased to write about our experiences as a family with special needs education in the Australian and attach a copy of that article.

We feel a significant obligation to speak in support of special needs education and the incredible value special needs education has provided to our family. Disability is for most an unplanned and unexpected situation. For many families, caring for a child with a disability is isolating and disruptive, often making it difficult to maintain work and social connections. We are mindful that our family experiences disability from a place of privilege, but even within that privilege, it would not be possible for our family to function or for our daughter to have achieved what she has achieved without the support of St Lucy's and St Edmunds.

We strongly encourage the Committee to visit as many special needs schools as possible and to meet and talk to those families who benefit from special needs education. We particularly encourage the Committee to visit a range of special needs schools to develop an understanding of the scope and nature of disability supported by the schools. Disability is an expression which encompasses a wide variety of need. Even within a condition such as autism, there is a huge variation in the nature and severity of autism and the impact on people over time. It is therefore essential that decisions around the options for special needs schools consider all the needs of disability, not just some disability.

We note the one of the proposals included in the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse and Neglect of People with a Disability. The Commission put forward two options for special needs education. Under one proposal, it was suggested that Special Needs schools be closed to new enrolments and then closed altogether. We have several difficulties with this proposal, including the lack of evidence in any other public policy setting to support the assertion that this would be effective. Instead, there is significant risk of closing a system which provides an incredible level of educational and personal support not only to children but to families.

We strongly support the alternative recommendation that where parents wish to place their children in mainstream schools, they are entitled to do so. However, special needs schools should be allowed to also grow and develop. Special needs schools should be allowed to

continue their outreach programmes with mainstream schools, something well established within both St Lucy's and St Edmunds.

NSW should continue their leadership role in providing more options for families with a disability, rather than fewer. St Edmunds is an important example of a system that should be replicated and developed. St Edmunds is a small high school which accepts a small cohort of students with more moderate disability. The school functions more like a standard high school with some students able to independently travel to school, more freedom of movement for students and the ability for those students with greater levels of disability to benefit from interacting with higher functioning children. St Edmunds has made a demonstrable difference to Matilda's language skills, social interactions and prospects for independence. Most importantly, this has been achieved within a framework of personal safety which we do not believe could be replicated in any mainstream school.

A key part of the value of special needs schools is the community we have build within the school. Parenting is difficult and having like minded parents to share the experience of disability with is a source of incredible comfort. Some of our fellow parents have experienced the loneliness and distress of mainstream schools prior to coming to St Edmunds.

Education is the pathway via which our children seek to achieve their potential. We do not know what our daughter's potential is but we strongly believe that she would have no prospect of achieving that potential without the support of first St Lucys and now St Edmunds.

We would both welcome the opportunity to speak with the Committee about our experiences.


Fiona Davies
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Neurosurgeon and Past President AMA

Wednesday, February 28, 2024 | Today's Paper | Mind Games

Our beautiful Matilda needs a special deal at school

By **FIONA DAVIES** and **BRIAN OWLER**

5:00AM JANUARY 17, 2024 •  80 COMMENTS

Our beautiful, inspirational 13-year-old Matilda has moderate to severe autism and developmental delay. As her parents, reading the report of the [Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability](#) was both distressing and uplifting. Uplifting because the report calls for Australia to be a more tolerant, supportive and inclusive society, a dream we share.

Public consultation on the report closes on Friday. [We support much of it, except the most controversial recommendation – the closure of special needs schools.](#)

If there is one issue we feel competent to comment on, it is an issue that combines policy, politics and schools. Between us we have more than 20 years of experience in health policy and advocacy. This well-intentioned idea is bad policy and bad politics.

The commissioners in their report had a strong difference of view about the approach to take on special needs schools. Half called for the abolition of special needs schools; the other half put forward a compromise of a guaranteed right for any child to attend mainstream schooling while also maintaining the special needs schools.

Segregation in education traditionally references those segmented by race. Those segregated by race needed access and equity, but otherwise not special accommodation. People with disability absolutely need special accommodations, that is what we fight so hard for as parents. Education is the pathway to the opportunity we all want for our children, whatever that opportunity might be.

Matilda attends St Edmund's College, Wahroonga in Sydney. She started at its feeder school, St Lucy's, an incredible school that accepts all levels of children with disability, including the most profoundly disabled.

Time spent at St Lucy's is both confronting and uplifting. Many children cannot walk or talk, go to the toilet or care for themselves. Despite that, the teachers find the spark of joy in the children and they make it grow.

Our other children have attended well-resourced private schools. Despite the level of resourcing, we have seen their mainstream schools struggle with the incredible demands of mental health issues, behavioural issues, parental expectations and all the other pressures of modern high school life. We know the challenges are even greater in our public school system.

When the mainstream education system is being asked to support more children with mild developmental issues, as well as all manner of other issues, we should not add further and more serious demands. We fear, with good reason and ample evidence, children with a disability will be left to languish in mainstream schools, with their classmates in mainstream schools also having their education compromised.

By supporting the recommendation to allow choice and maintain special needs schools, we can support the needs of all children. Rather than closing special needs schools, we should be providing families with more options.

Matilda's attendance at St Edmund's has been life changing. St Edmund's is a small high school with a mix of higher-functioning adolescents with disability. Many families chose to leave mainstream schools to attend St Edmund's because their children were provided much greater support. We personally know so many children who have missed out on St Edmund's because of the size of the intake.

St Edmund's style schools are not accessible in most states. We need more schools like St Edmund's, not fewer.

A special needs school is not just a school. It is a community of people sharing an experience none of us plans or expects. It is the safe place against the challenges of the world so well described by the royal commission, a world of stares and "what's wrong with that girl?" that we inhabit.

While we work to improve the world for people with a disability, we need to maintain and grow our special needs schools for those who want them.

As parents of a child with special needs and as public health professionals, we encourage others to make a submission to the commission to support choice, to support special needs schools, and to support well-funded and effective mainstream schools. The enemy of good public policy is uncertainty and delay. We would strongly encourage state governments to make submissions supporting the sensible and inclusive recommendation ensuring access to special schools and giving certainty to our schools and families.

Let's expand the opportunities available for children with disabilities. Please don't close the door on them.

Fiona Davies is chief executive of the Australian Medical Association (NSW); Brian Oowler is a neurosurgeon and a past federal AMA president.

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