

Submission
No 69

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

Name: Name suppressed
Date Received: 4 April 2024

Partially
Confidential

Abigail Boyd, MLC
Chair - NSW Parliamentary Inquiry
Children and young people with disability in New South Wales educational settings
Gadigal Country
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000

29 February 2024

Dear Abigail and Committee,

My name is _____, and I'd like to share my experiences of disability in NSW educational settings with you from 3 separate perspectives: as a former student of NSW public schools and university with a neurodevelopmental disability; as a Masters qualified NESA accredited teacher and certifying ADHD Coach working with individuals with disabilities attending NSW schools; and as a parent of a child with disabilities attending a NSW public school.

My submission is deeply personal; writing it has been both a traumatic and cathartic process. I'd like to include a trigger warning for any people reading as my submission includes narratives about abuse and trauma.

I deeply and sincerely hope the Committee and future law and policy makers in NSW consider lived experience as a valid and valuable source of evidence to inform decisions about the future of education in our state. I also hope you genuinely understand that the stakes couldn't be higher for children with neurodevelopmental disabilities – without urgent action and change, we will continue to lose more and more of our kids – out of education; out of society; to the justice system; and to suicide. Without urgent action and change we'll also continue to lose more and more of our teachers. Now is the time to be bold and turn our education crisis around.

I'm grateful for the opportunity to offer my perspectives through this submission. I welcome any questions and the chance to attend the hearing should I be required.

Kind Regards

Accredited Teacher, NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA)
ADHD Family Coach (Children, Teens & Adults), trained and certifying
Student Member, Australasian ADHD Professionals Association (AADPA)
Member, International Coaching Federation (ICF)



Please note: all views expressed are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views of any of the accrediting bodies or associations I am a member of.

1. Insights from my experience as a student in NSW public schools

Firstly, I'd like to make it clear that I'm not sharing my story to make a complaint about the teachers or school system 30+ years ago. I am sharing my story because I want to demonstrate the impact our education system and the educators within it have on people's lives, whether intentional or not. I am also sharing this part of my story to illustrate that not much has changed in 30 years.

I have tried to write this for several weeks now, but it was so difficult (traumatic) that I decided the best way to articulate my experience was through a series of drawings. After creating the images, I was somehow able to also express myself in words, so I'll include each image with my narrative below.

1. The teacher who left permanent scars on my brain

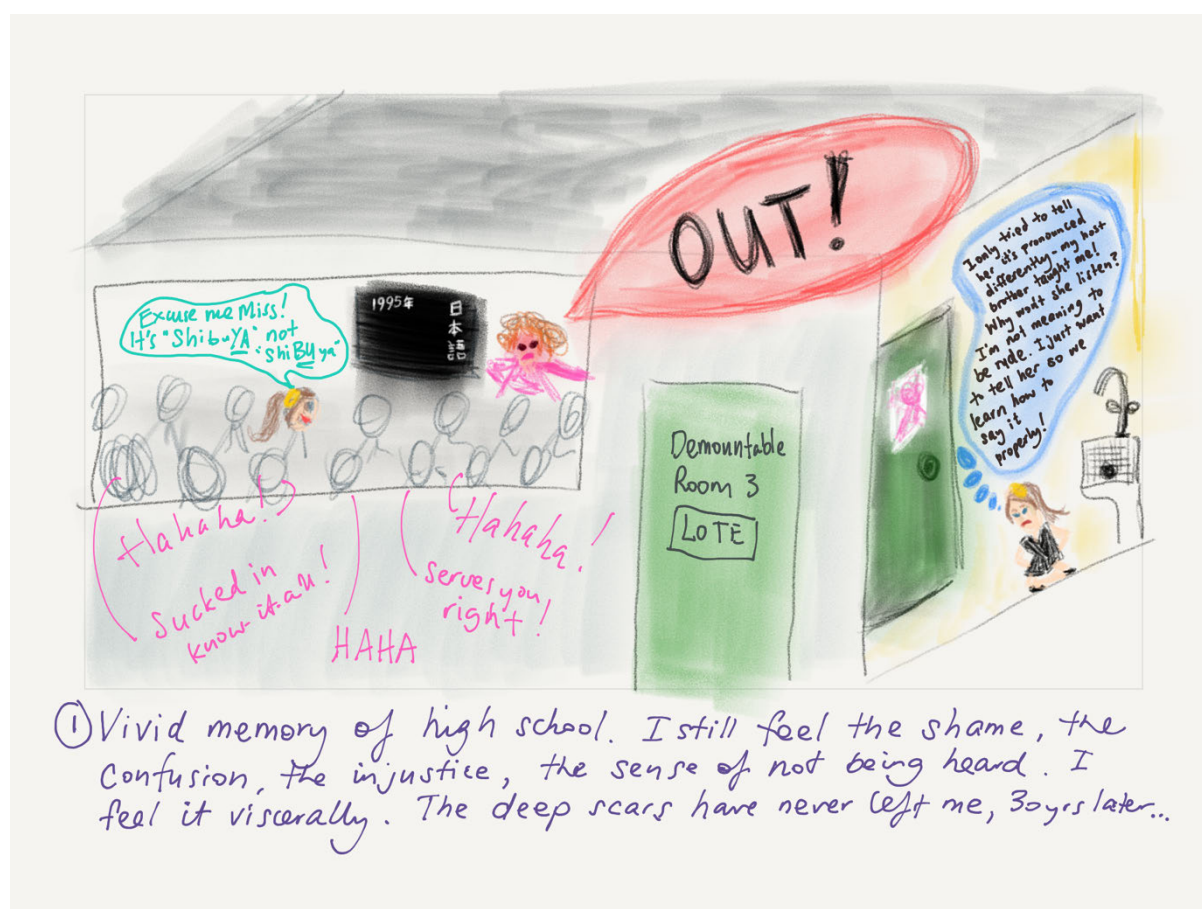


Image description (image 1/3): A drawing of a demountable classroom in a NSW public school in the 1990s. The scene on the left shows a chalk board: the year is 1995 and it is "Japanese language" class. A student speaks up to explain the correct pronunciation of a word in Japanese. The teacher becomes red-faced and angrily yells "Out!" while pointing to the classroom door. The other students laugh at her and call her names. The scene on the right shows the same student in school uniform sitting cross-legged on the floor of the demountable classroom foyer, after having been sent out. Her thought bubble shows her confusion as to why she is in trouble for simply helping.

I was in love with Japan – it was my special interest. My high school Japanese teacher was actually a trained Bahasa Indonesian language teacher, and as I recall she was studying Japanese at night at TAFE whilst teaching us.

That's OK – everyone is allowed to learn. What's not OK is when teachers are given the power to bully a 14 year old child because they ask so many questions, are talkative, have trouble focussing and staying on task, are so enthusiastic they call out in class, and constantly wiggle their body around in their chair. Or because they dare to tell the teacher the correct pronunciation of a word, because their Japanese host brother had corrected their own pronunciation of the same word during the sister school exchange trip they went on together.

That's what happened to me. I was told to leave the class, and was forced to sit in the foyer of our classroom until the end of the lesson. I even remember times I simply had to enter the classroom and she would look at me, scream "OUT!" and point to the foyer. If I went in to see what they were doing, I was screamed at to get out again. This occurred almost every Japanese lesson for a couple of years. In summer it was hot enough to fry an egg on the bitumen the demountable classroom sat on, and in winter it got cold enough it snowed outside.

2. The short term impact of behaviourist approaches and teachers who abuse their power

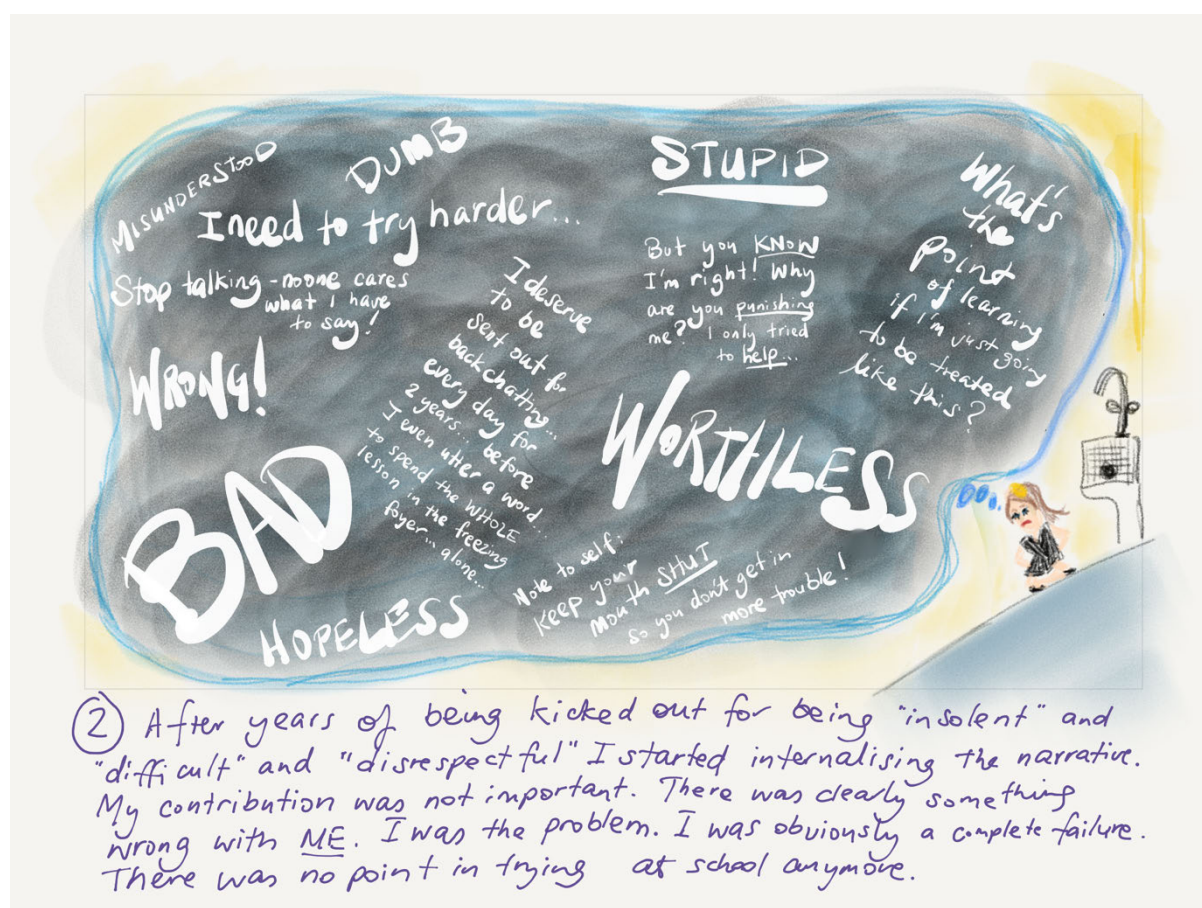


Image description (image 2/3): A drawing of a teen in school uniform still sitting cross-legged on the floor of the demountable classroom foyer. Her thought bubble reveals some of many negative intrusive thoughts about herself, compliance leading to shut down and giving up, masking, and internalised ableism.

I'd come home in tears day after day. Despite trying to hide it, my mum figured out something was up and I confided in her. She tried to advocate for me by going to the

Principal (who by the way is a truly wonderful and kind human who I am now proud to call my friend and mentor). The Principal's hands were tied – I had broken the rules, I was rude, I was insolent, and I was disruptive, so the teacher was within her rights to punish me. The teacher was also married to the Deputy Principal...

That day, I sat outside the Principal's office and made a promise to myself. I committed that feeling to memory - what it feels like to be a young person trying to find their way in the world, knowing they are genuinely a 'good' person who is trying their best, speaking up for what they believed was right, but somehow keep getting it so very wrong. I vowed that if I ever worked with young people I would never, EVER allow them to feel that way.

When I'd arrived fresh from primary school a few years earlier, I was one of the top students in Year 6 in every learning area. I guess I would have said at that time I was smart, eager to learn, and bright. As time went on, I experienced life as a high schooler with teachers like this one, and others who clearly had no business being near young people. Like the teachers who hated their jobs and should have retired years before, but because they were permanent got to stay despite the disgraceful way they treated students; or the teacher who should have been fired for the myriad sexual predator allegations students (including me) reported over many years, but somehow remained on staff.

It wasn't just the teachers – the general rules across school were oppressive, sometimes ridiculous, rules for the sake of having rules. Sit still. Eyes to the front. Look at me when I'm talking to you. Sit up straight. Wear a uniform that's itchy, feels like a straight jacket and don't even think about complaining. Out of bounds in places that aren't actually unsafe. No speaking unless spoken to. Ignore your natural body signals and only use the bathroom, eat and drink water during designated times signalled by a bell. I didn't know why at the time, but I spent so much time and energy trying to remember the rules, to comply at all costs, to be a 'good' student, that I could barely manage to muster enough energy to learn something once the opportunity came.

I started to disengage from learning across many of my subjects, even the ones I loved. "What's the point?" I thought. I started internalising the things my teachers and peers said about me and to me. I became a people pleaser – eager to do anything I was told to do for fear of being in trouble. I was easily manipulated and started hanging out with kids who I thought were 'cool', because my other friends were aiming for high marks and didn't want to hang out with me for fear I was dragging them down.

My sense of self hit rock bottom, but it was the 90s so people didn't talk about feelings. Doctors had yet to understand widely that people of all genders could have neurodevelopmental disabilities, and in regional NSW we were lucky to have GPs let alone specialists. I believed I was the problem. I was a loser, alone, and I couldn't ask for help – even if I did my complaints would have been dismissed because I was a 'troublemaker', and no one in a position of authority could actually do anything about it,

even if they wanted to. Regardless of diagnoses or lack thereof, the truth was the school system and environment itself disabled me.

3. The long term impact



Image description (image 3/3): A drawing of a woman wearing a purple dress sitting cross-legged on a floor. Her thought bubble reveals the same intrusive thoughts as the previous image, only this time the thoughts persist and permeate every part of her sense of self-worth. Amongst the thoughts are gold coloured bubbles, each one with tick boxes describing some of her significant academic and professional achievements from Year 11 to age 39. The purple text below the graphic in her own handwriting offers commentary on the impact of her (undiagnosed) neurodevelopmental disabilities on her learning and as a professional.

I spent my entire life believing this narrative about myself. When I was 39, now a parent, I was Googling some interesting traits I'd noticed in my child and realised I ticked most of the boxes myself. My GP believed me, empowered me and I got an official diagnosis of ADHD, and I've since self-diagnosed as autistic (valid and accepted by the autistic community). Being neurodevelopmental disabilities, they have been my reality since birth and will be for the rest of my life. They are as much a part of me as my eye colour.

I can't explain what a relief it was to learn officially I wasn't crazy, dumb, stupid or useless – I simply have a brain that's different to neurotypical brains – the types of brains our education system is built for. Realising that unforgiving, inflexible, unsupportive, punitive formal learning environments created barriers to learning causing me to be disabled was utterly life changing. It helped me understand myself and my child. It also created a grieving process culminating in a fire in my belly for the thousands of children who also believe *they* are the problem – the ones our education system continues to fail.

But the status quo is no longer acceptable. Former and current education policies, along with people making decisions about disabled people's lives, enable - and encourage - child abuse.

2. Insights from my experiences as a neurodivergent teacher, neuroaffirming education consultant & ADHD Family Coach

The way I see things now, it's clear my Japanese teacher at my NSW public high school in the 90s was not entirely at fault. Sure, it would have been better if she had a better understanding of the language before teaching high school Japanese. Sure, it was on her to behave like a grown up, to seek counselling for her apparent need to control me, to choose a different way to express her emotions – or behave to the same standard NSW Department of Education policies expect of students (whose brains are not actually capable of doing yet - see Dr Dan Siegel). But she got away with it because the system enabled her to. In fact, the system encouraged her to.

Because the system is built on the premise that students can control their actions (behaviour), and when they don't, they must be doing it on purpose, and therefore must be punished (consequence). Oh, but it's OK – it's 'evidence based', because some behavioural scientists told our predecessors that using a framework called 'Positive Behaviour for Learning' (PBL) is the best way to make sure schools run effectively. We'll use 'positive reinforcement' - make sure we reward the "good" students - we'll give them praise for 'making good choices', we'll give them stickers, merit points and awards for 'good work' and compliance with the rules. That will fix the "naughty" ones, because when they see others get rewarded for doing the right thing, that will change their behaviour, right?

Wrong.

Behaviourism has no place in education. It is abuse.

Children and young people are not human subjects for the government to experiment on for decades after the 'evidence' passed its use by date. The children and young people who I went to school with now run this state, and operate from a place of fear and control, because that's what has always been done - it "works". My question though is, what's the criteria for "working"?

Behaviourism probably did "work" quite effectively when education was introduced at a population level for the industrial revolution. For students to eventually become factory workers, they just had to learn to do as they were told by the authoritative figures in charge, and not ask questions.

But it is now 2024 - if the goal of education now and into the future is not compliance but learning, when are we going to *genuinely* change our system? Who is going to make the bold decision to stop the abuse? To make school a place of genuine learning, growth, nurturing – a safe place and time for ALL students? Who is going to make this change happen with the urgency it deserves?

Every student is impacted negatively under a behaviourist approach. It creates schools centred around power battles, punishing children for being themselves, for being - dare I say - children! And for students who don't fit the mould, such as those of us with neurodevelopmental disabilities, the impact can literally be deadly.

I would also go so far as to say every teacher and school staff member is impacted negatively within a behaviourist framework. The mass exodus of teaching staff in recent years, plus the qualified, accredited teachers like me who aren't teaching in a school for fear it will extinguish the very reason we wanted to become teachers in the first place (or the justifiable fear that disclosing our neurodevelopmental disabilities will lead to discrimination - why wouldn't it when it's happening to our students under our noses?), may be a pretty good indication this approach isn't working.

I've added an appendix with a case study of a student, "Tommy", who I worked with in 2023. I've kept it separate and request confidentiality to protect the identities of the individuals discussed. It illustrates what's possible with genuine teacher care and kindness, and the desperate need for additional training and support for both students and teachers. I also describe witnessing a teacher deliberately and wilfully provoke a student using their known triggers, in an apparent attempt to have them excluded from the school; entrenched attitudes of teachers that students with disabilities belong in support units or special schools; and the gross systemic failure of our education system to provide basic human rights to children.

Our students are in crisis. Our families are in crisis. Our teachers are in crisis.

Neither the Federal nor State Governments can afford to be complacent or pass the buck back and forth to each other any longer. The evidence is there in stark detail and has been for over four decades, as established in the recent Disability Royal Commission. Inquiries, Senate Committees, Working Groups, Steering Committees - how many more do we need to see action? This is not the ABC's Utopia - these are real people being disabled by people in power making ill-informed decisions.

Before she passed away suddenly in 2023, the late Lou Kuchel - brave and bold mum, advocate and founder of 'Square Peg Round Whole' - believed so strongly that behaviourism needs to be abolished in schools, that she started a petition to the state ministers for education. Lou wasn't just having a whinge - she presented a solid case backed by a huge community of families with neurodivergent children, and even presented a viable, strategic, well researched, highly effective alternative framework called 'Collaborative and Proactive Solutions' (CPS), developed by former Harvard Medical School Professor and UTS Adjunct Professor Dr Ross Greene. Lou even arranged for NSW Department of Education heads to meet with Dr Ross Greene in person during his visit to Sydney when he ran a 2 day Advanced CPS training course.

Sadly, Lou passed away before she was able to meet Dr Greene in person, however he met with NSW DET officials as planned at the conclusion of Day 1 and reported back to the group of trainees (I was one of them) on Day 2. Yet despite Dr Greene's personal

attendance to explain the efficacy of CPS, and even though Lou's petition now has over 22,000 signatures, so far to my knowledge no commitment has been made, and no genuine action has been taken to shift the NSW education system from a behaviourist to collaborative approach. I'm curious to know what their excuses are – I suspect the words 'evidence based' and 'lack of funding' will form part of the narrative.

Phrases like 'evidence based' are thrown around without a second thought to what the term truly means. Behaviourism aside, the body of scientific research on neurodevelopmental disabilities is almost entirely made up of studies about heterosexual Caucasian boys and men, by heterosexual Caucasian men. This is slowly changing thanks to some pioneering, brave women and non-binary neurodivergent researchers with varied intersectionality (such as race, sexuality, and gender). But when lives are at stake it's not enough to hide behind an 'evidence base' that's outdated, unhelpful and in many cases cause more harm than good. Being 'evidence informed' by applying social science research and information from people with rich lived experience – listening to and acting on the voices of people who are impacted by the laws and policies being made – could be an easy yet highly effective shift.

3. Insights as the parent of a child with disabilities

*I've added this section separately as Appendix 2 and request confidentiality to protect my child's privacy.

Children do not choose to be born with disabilities. All children deserve to be included, be nurtured, thrive, learn at school alongside their non-disabled peers. Society needs to be reflected in the make up of our classrooms. If it's not, we risk alienating and excluding disabled people even further. It's frankly embarrassing that we must beg to simply have schools provide our kids the bare minimum afforded any other kid.

A few ideas for change

I truly believe that when the majority of teachers and Department decision makers started their careers, they did so believing that the profession is a way to nurture children - to contribute to society by playing a role in the growth and development of the next generation. It honestly feels like at some point, the balance towards using power and control against children tipped so far that it's become too daunting and humiliating to shift the scales towards policies practices that treat children with kindness. But if we don't, who will? And if not now, when? How many more children need to be marginalised, segregated, excluded, stigmatised, and harmed before someone is brave enough to acknowledge and make radical change?

The evidence has told us for decades we have this wrong - we know better, so we MUST do better. NSW has the opportunity right now to be the leaders in inclusive education in our country. What if instead of focussing on the barriers, we look at the possibilities? I'd like to share some ideas on how genuine educational reform in NSW could happen.

We start with you, the Members of the NSW Parliament who care enough to give disabled people input into the changes needed in our education system, to take the lead on the foundations of inclusion in NSW educational settings via legislation that genuinely protects students like Tommy, keeps adults with power accountable, and sets the expectations for a truly inclusive education for every student in our state.

As part of this legislative change, we need to lead a philosophical, framework and mindset shift to shift away from deficit based, punitive ways to ‘manage behaviour’ like [PBL/PBS](#), to a model which gets to the underlying reasons behind students’ behaviour and does not punish people for being disabled. The strengths based problem solving approach [Collaborative and Proactive Solutions](#) (CPS) is a great fit. As with any meaningful change, managing such a paradigm shift from “Kids do well if they want to” to “Kids do well if they can” (Dr Ross Greene), will require brave people with deep core beliefs that inclusion is the only possible way forward leading the way. I truly hope it will be a case of ‘adults do well if they can’, too.

In conjunction with CPS, we can learn from experts in Australia and around the world including [Dr Mona Delahooke](#), [Dr Lori Desautels](#), and [Dr Greg Santucci](#); to ensure any legislative and policy changes are underpinned by the latest scientific evidence on the role of neurobiology and the impacts on learning.

Much like the accessible standards in the National Construction Code for designing buildings that meet the needs of disabled people and in turn make physical spaces accessible for all people, we need specific legislation and accountability measures to ensure that every student has the access they need to learn in any educational jurisdiction or setting. This can be achieved through Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a learning framework that benefits ALL learners, including learners with disabilities. According to experts including [Dr Katie Novak](#), [Dr Paula Kluth](#), and [Loren Swancutt](#), true inclusion in schools simply can’t happen without UDL. Astoundingly, the NSW DET has [an entire section dedicated to UDL](#), yet the reality is that UDL is barely understood, let alone implemented across the state. We need to stop accepting mediocre. We need to remove red tape, expect better from our public servants, and hold people in positions of authority (including teachers) accountable so the law, policies and inclusive practises are actually implemented at all levels, not just discussed at conferences or added to a web page for optics. We need to employ passionate disabled people to lead and implement the shift to inclusive practice.

We can learn from neuroaffirming lived experience educators and allied health professionals such as [Kristy Forbes](#), [Sandhya Menon](#), [Christina Keeble](#), [Em Hammond \(NeuroWild\)](#), and [Dr Siobhan Lamb](#) - people who walk the talk every day, and can help us understand how to better serve all students, including those with neurodevelopmental disabilities.

Finally, and most importantly, we can ensure any actions we take elevate the voices of disabled young people, including learners with neurodevelopmental disabilities, who

experience these barriers every single day. We have so much to learn from young people like [Summer Farrelly](#), and from Tommy and my child whose experiences I have shared here. Every educational setting in NSW has students with disabilities who are the experts in what they need. We simply need to ask what they need and take action accordingly.

What is possible if we can make this happen?

School becomes a safe place for children, teachers, support staff, and school executives. Relational safety improves. Students with disabilities, students experiencing 'school can't', and students who have been marginalised by our current system feel - and are - supported and welcome. Other challenges such as bullying, problem behaviours, wellbeing issues, police and youth justice referrals become minimal. Talented qualified teachers working in other professions feel supported enough to return to schools. Learning increases, resulting in long term improvements in productivity, wellbeing, and overall contribution to society as citizens of NSW.

That sounds pretty good to me.