

**REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE**

**PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 3 – EDUCATION**

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

**At Shellharbour on Friday, 19 May 2017**

**The Committee met at 10:05 am**

**PRESENT**

The Hon. L. Amato (Chair)

The Hon. J. Graham

The Hon. N. Maclaren-Jones

Mr D. Shoebridge



**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the fourth hearing of the Portfolio Committee No. 3 inquiry into the Education of Students with a Disability or Special Needs in NSW Schools. This broad-ranging inquiry will consider a number of important issues, including equity of access to resources for students with disability or special needs across the State, the Every Student, Every School policy and current complaint and review mechanisms. It is important to point out that this inquiry is not intended to investigate individual cases but rather to consider broader policy solutions to the issues raised in the terms of reference. Before I commence, I acknowledge the Dharawal nation and the Wodi Wodi people who are the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we meet. I also pay respect to the Elders past and present and extend that respect to other Aboriginals present.

Today is the fourth of six hearings that we plan to hold for this inquiry. We will hear from parents, teachers, organisations and regional representatives of the NSW Department of Education. Before we commence I will make some brief comments about the procedures for today's hearing. In accordance with the broadcasting guidelines, while members of the media may film or record Committee members and witnesses, people in the public gallery should not be the primary focus of any filming or photography. I remind media representatives that they must take responsibility for what they publish about the Committee's proceedings.

It is important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to what witnesses may say outside of the evidence at the hearing and so I urge witnesses to be careful about any comments you make to the media or to others after you complete your evidence. Such comments will not be protected by parliamentary privilege if another person decided to take any action for defamation. The guidelines for the broadcast of proceedings are available from the secretariat. There may be some questions that a witness could only answer if they had more time or with certain documents to hand and in these circumstances witnesses are advised that they can take a question on notice and provide an answer within 21 days.

I remind everyone here today, that committee hearings are not intended to provide a forum for people to make adverse reflections upon others under the protection of parliamentary privilege. I therefore request that witnesses focus on the issues raised by the inquiry and terms of reference and avoid naming individuals unnecessarily. To aid the audibility of this hearing I remind both Committee members and witnesses to speak into the microphones. In addition, several seats have been reserved in the front row of the public gallery for persons who have hearing difficulties. Finally, would everyone turn their mobile phones to silent for the duration of the hearing. I now welcome the panel of teachers who are our first witnesses.

**ROBYN CHRISTOFIDES**, Head Teacher, Special Education, Figtree High School, Flametree Campus, affirmed and examined

**JOHN KOTLASH**, Assistant Principal, Sanctuary Point Public School, Special Education Needs Support Unit, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** Would you like to start by making a short statement? Please keep it to no more than about two minutes.

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** I have been a teacher for 35 years. For the past 26 years I have worked in special education, first as a secondary learning support teacher and, since 1995, as a teacher and head teacher in off-site programs for secondary students with mental health disabilities. Since 2000 I have been the head teacher at Flametree. Flametree is an off-site campus of Figtree High School located at north Wollongong, seven kilometres from the main campus. Flametree has five emotional disturbance [ED] classes, making it the same size as a medium-sized behaviour school. Unfortunately, the Illawarra does not have a behaviour school and our staffing and funding are the same as an on-site special education unit with five classes. Figtree High School has always been supportive but resources are always limited.

Students with mental health disabilities are among the most vulnerable in our society and school communities. In my experience, they rarely have parents who can advocate for them nor are there disability organisations championing their cause. In the big picture, they are a small percentage of our total student population but they require significant system resources in order to achieve a positive educational outcome. A mental health disability is most often the product of environmental factors—childhood trauma, abuse, neglect, poverty and social disadvantage.

I want to tell you a little about my students. All of our students have very challenging behaviours. Some have histories of drug and alcohol abuse and criminal behaviours. Some will spend periods of their adolescence in Juvenile Justice centres. By the time students arrive at Flametree they have experienced multiple failures in the community and in the school system. This includes failures in residential placements and other support class settings. Aboriginal students are unfortunately over-represented in our school population. Currently 51 per cent of our students are Indigenous. We also have several students with dual disabilities of autism and intellectual disability. Significant numbers of students live in residential care where the staff turnover is high. Their teachers and school support staff are often the only constant adults in their lives.

Despite the challenges these students face however, I want to give you good news. A successful experience in education can be a significant protective factor in improving the long-term outlook for these vulnerable young people. I know, because I have seen the results. If specialist education services are part of an approach where schools, Health, Juvenile Justice, Family and Community Services and non-government organisations can work productively together, we can achieve the best possible outcome for these vulnerable young people. We can make a real difference in breaking the cycle of social disadvantage and disability.

School facilities for students with mental health disabilities need to be purpose-designed and staffed with well-trained and properly supported personnel implementing evidence-based systems and practices. Our students also need guaranteed access to all of the resources the New South Wales education system can provide—assisted travel; school counselling; full access to distance education, so that we can work in partnership with subject specialist teachers; as well as early entry to TAFE vocational training pathways. If we can access these resources, we can deliver life-changing results.

I am sorry to report that, for my students, access has been more limited over the past two years. Often I feel it is a constant battle to advocate for and meet the students' needs within the education system.

I want to emphasise that even though educating students with mental health disabilities is a costly exercise the difference we can make in our students' lives does not stop with them. I am fortunate in having done my job long enough to see many of my past students functioning as responsible productive members of the community, living within the law, working in jobs they enjoy and parenting their children much more effectively than they are parented. This is what we can achieve if we are given the resources to make it possible.

**Mr KOTLASH:** I have not pre-prepared a statement so I will let you guys guide me in the questioning.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Are there any initial observations you wanted to make, Mr Kotlash?

**Mr KOTLASH:** Yes, I will give a bit of information about where I have worked so you know where I am coming from. I have worked as a teacher in a support unit setting, a formal setting. I have worked as a teacher in a behaviour support unit in a facility shared with the Department of Juvenile Justice. I have worked as head teacher in a rural high school in New South Wales. I have worked as a teacher teaching behaviour classes in high schools and in primary schools. I have worked as a mainstream teacher. I worked as a teacher support in New Zealand for a short stint on an autism class, which was an interesting year. Other than that I am running a five class unit of support classes and enjoying that and working in a school that has forward thinking and positive ideas to offer.

**The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES:** Thank you for coming today. Ms Christofides, I am interested in getting more background and information about the unit you work at. It is part of the mainstream school but not fully integrated?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** There are two high schools in the Illawarra that run off-site settings, Wollongong High School of the Performing Arts is one. It runs a three class secondary setting. At Figtree High School we have a five class secondary setting. Neither of our units integrates so we are getting the students at the end of multiple failures and we hope to retain kids for a number of years. We are successfully integrating students post Year 10 to Five Islands Secondary College, to TAFE and a few students have gone back to their local high schools and successfully completed their Higher School Certificate. There are work training pathways and that is the other option for our students.

**The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES:** Is there any integration of shared resources between teachers, apart from physically sharing a location with the mainstream?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** I am an active part of the Figtree High School executive and I contribute my expertise in particular to behaviour management strategies and skills within the school. The geographic location, seven kilometres away, makes it difficult.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** You are in north Wollongong?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** That is correct, Figtree High School is in Figtree.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Seven kilometres away from Figtree, which is south of that?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** Yes, with lots of expressways and overpasses in between.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Lots of concrete?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** Yes. Teachers are coming off site and there are industrial issues around travel during the school day.

**The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES:** What about funding, is it clearly defined or is that shared?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** At the moment I am funded as a faculty of the school plus we will get a piece of the school's resource allocation model [RAM], but it is a small amount of money. It is less than \$15,000 to run five classes. We often have to feed and clothe kids. It is always tight. We have to manage our budget responsibly, that is why distance education has been such a boon to us. We have been using distance education since 2002 and getting many students through that Year 10 credential, which is a great pathway to other things in their lives. In 2014 we were told there would be no more access to distance education but we put forward a case to explain why it was essential. We are now only permitted four subjects in stage four and five, full access for stage six, which means that we are locally delivering some subjects. I wonder if the average parents would be happy having the PE teacher teach maths.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Is that shift the thing that has made it harder?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** We adapt because we are special education teachers. The thought that we would lose distance education and that access was frightening to me because we had provided a really rich education working in partnership with those subject specialists and having the latest curriculum. Fortunately distance education in New South Wales has excellent curriculum that is well prepared by experts.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Can you tell us how that distance education works at Figtree?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** Now stage four and five is delivered in a totally online mode. That is the new way curriculum will be delivered. Because our kids are reluctant learners, they have gaps in their learning, you have to work in partnership with them around the curriculum material. Our teachers are actively teaching across

Key Learning Areas but you have that support of the expert teacher who they can call and ask: What is this? How do we do this? What are you looking for?

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Is there a class time in distance education such as you are going to geography from nine o'clock?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** No. The beauty of it for us is I can structure my classes on safety. I can look at a student's behaviour skill set and say I will put that kid in that grouping whether they are in year seven or year 11 and it does not matter if kids miss days of school because they are going to come in and work on totally their own program and the subjects that they have chosen. It is their own program and where they are up to. It is a totally individualised mode and they can pick up the curriculum at any point and learn without there being a time for English, a time for Maths.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** And you were saying in the last couple of years there has been less access and it has been more difficult, can you explain that?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** Yes. In December 2013 we received an email that said, "You will not have access to distance education any more next year". The distance education high school learnt at the same time that was the case and that was just frightening. The richness of the curriculum was going to be ripped out and we would be not be offering our kids the best quality education we could. I then began to campaign through my local member, with my principal, to explain the unique nature of our environment and why it was essential and we did get that limited access for four subjects in Stage 4 and 5.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Mr Kotlash, is distance education part of your school, and if not, could it be a useful part of it?

**Mr KOTLASH:** No, distance education is not part of our unit specifically. There are occasions where students will access distance education if they have essentially attended our unit and failed. One of the options is to apply for distance education and perhaps have a separate place for that student to be. If they are the type of student that has a mental illness that might preclude them from being near large crowds of people, clearly that is problematic in a school where you have children running everywhere having fun. That is an option we can access. The process for that is fairly lengthy and not to be jumped into lightly.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Do you think for the reasons that Ms Christofides is saying, that the flexibility of it, the ability to tailor it to a child's education stages, the fact that they do not miss a whole class if they miss a day, do you think that would be useful in the classes you teach?

**Mr KOTLASH:** Not in the classes I teach, in that at the moment I am in a primary setting so we have primary teachers who are not subject specific, they are across all of the curriculum areas. However, as a program, to be able to run a one-on-one curriculum area, it is a really good program. We have not been given access to it because it is tied into the allocation of resources. We are allocated a teacher and resources based on the enrolment that we have. That person or that child will then become a shared enrolment at another school who is also receiving resources to have that child enrolled.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** You would win and lose?

**Mr KOTLASH:** No, we would win because it would be better for the child, but someone would have to pay for that.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Can I ask about the funding background for Flametree. It sounds like quite an unusual arrangement. Your students are funded at the high school student funding rate?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** That is right.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** But if it was a specific special school, that would not be the case, is that correct?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** Yes, it would attract its own school funding.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Which would effectively be at the primary school level per student?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** I think there is also a secondary supplementation for staffing, supplementation if you are fully secondary SSP.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** What you are describing is quite an unusual situation?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** Yes.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Even if that was recognised more formally, it may have other funding implications?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** Yes. I think for programs we would probably be better off, and you would know what you were going to get.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Yes, you would have more certainty.

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** Yes, more certainty. You would have a larger executive, so at the moment I am running the setting, whereas a medium-sized school for specific purposes [SSP] would have one or two assistant principals [APs] and a principal, a school administration manager [SAM], which we do not have. I answer the phone and the door, and deal with those sorts of things. I feel the Illawarra does need a behaviour SSP, but that is not a decision for me to make.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** That would be good for the Illawarra. On balance, for your situation, for your students, for your part of the school, it is a net positive, but are there any disadvantages?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** I believe it would be a net positive. I have been fortunate in that I have had three principals who are extremely supportive and who have made sure that we were well resourced. It is always: Does the leadership in the high school see value in what we do? We have been fortunate in that they do, and we have been well resourced, but that is always in the future. I am retiring this year, but I worry about what the future will be for Flametree.

**Mr KOTLASH:** Something that a principal has is the problem of competing programs. They have got a behaviour program, they have got someone competent in charge; it is working well. They might have a program somewhere else that they are also responsible for that might not be working so well. They might like to take resources from that program and put it into that program to the detriment of what Robyn is trying to achieve. That happens.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Sure.

**The CHAIR:** I will follow up on a question from the Hon. John Graham relating to funding. I refer to your submission, in which you say that when a student leaves a school, the funding does not follow the student to the new school. Can you elaborate on that?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** For instance, the Aboriginal resource allocation model [RAM], if a student commences the year with us, they will be funded under the RAM funds at the beginning of the year at Figtree High School, but if they come to us—and our students come to us throughout the year. If a vacancy arises, the referral process happens twice a term every term so the students can commence at any time in the year. A student's RAM will not necessarily follow them to our setting.

**The CHAIR:** It stays with the school that they just left?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** Yes, it stays at the school they just left.

**The CHAIR:** Does the new school have to apply again, or do they have to wait for the next application?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** We have to wait for the next funding cycle and they will count in our RAM then.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I assume it is swings and roundabouts?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** Yes.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** People will be flashing in and out of schools?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** Yes.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Do the swings and roundabouts ever work in your favour?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** If a student is with us at the beginning of the year, yes, possibly they do. The students that we retain for several years, then possibly they do.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** You indicated a figure of \$15,000. Is that the negotiated figure with the principal for your allocation under RAM? Is it an arm wrestle to get \$15,000, even with a good principal?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** When I am talking \$15,000, I am also talking some of our tied grants, our school-to-work grants, so we have school to work and links support, which are disability grants that are mainly

to transition students to other settings in secondary. So we have to apply, as any faculty would, at Figtree High School.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Can you break down, as best you can—I am not after a precise figure—where the \$15,000 comes from?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** At the moment I think I am getting about \$10,000 in the school's budget.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** RAM?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** Yes, just from the faculty budgets, and then a portion of RAM, which would be for Aboriginal and low socio-economic status.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** How much are we talking about?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** A couple of thousand, I suppose.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** And altogether we are getting up to \$15,000?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** Around about. Sometimes I might have more.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** How many classes and students do you have?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** Five special ed classes, so that is 35 students.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** We are talking of the order of \$3,000 a year. That is the amount of money that you have that acknowledges all of those special needs that your student population has?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** Yes.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Sitting here I cannot imagine how you do your job with such limited resources?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** I am a penny pincher. We manage to save up for things. The good thing is that our tied funds stay in our bank account and we can build them up.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** What are your tied funds?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** They have pretty much disappeared now with RAM, but the RAM money will usually come into my bank account and stay there.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** You have a supportive principal who you negotiate with and you get a fair share of funding?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** Yes.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** You must talk with other teachers who have special ed classes and kids who have needs. How is it working across the region?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** Not uniformly is the most diplomatic I can put it.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Do not feel you have to be diplomatic.

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** I am part of a fairly active secondary special education network, part of Curriculum Networks Illawarra, and I see some of my fellow head teachers fighting for a few hundred dollars, say, to access some of the online learning platforms, which are very motivating for special ed students because there are instant responses from an online learning platform. One of my colleagues had quite a battle. She had to write a submission and did not get funded for a few hundred dollars.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** This has been a repeated theme in submissions we have received. Funding through the resource allocation model that is meant to go to special ed kids can be siphoned off for entirely unrelated projects.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Often important other projects, but pressing authorities it is not going where it might.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Is that a general issue and, if so, how should we resolve it?

**Mr KOTLASH:** Yes, it is a thing. An example I can give is that Vincentia High School, the local feeder high school for my school, at the moment has eight intellectual classes and another four behaviour classes so, in its own right, it could easily be a special school and quite a large special school, possibly one of the largest



special schools in the State. People like to call it a special school with a high school attached, because there is another thousand children who attend the high school there. They work under the same model under the same funding arrangements. It is very difficult to work out—I think you are doing really well to have a figure for each student, Robyn. That is pretty good, because I am pretty sure my colleagues at Vincentia would be unable to provide that without a deal of work. Also, I would not be able to provide that either. I would not be able to tell you exactly how much money has been allocated to my students individually in the support classes; that is a difficult thing to do. The provision of service is very—I am thinking carefully how I put this.

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** Uneven.

**Mr KOTLASH:** Yes, it is uneven. The area I am from at the moment, Sanctuary Point, has large areas of low socio-economic disadvantage. We get a fairly generous allocation in terms of schools around us but it is still nowhere enough to do the job effectively. We are hoping that Gonski comes through. That is a big thing that will even the playing field for us. It means the kids who are coming from a socio-economic disadvantaged area will have a fair start. That will be delightful but at the moment getting access to services for diagnosis is difficult for our guys. They are from a low socio-economic area. There is very little transport in our area so all of the services that exist are in Nowra and that is a 35 minute drive away. If you are in a bus it is next to non-existent.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Ms Christofides touched on travel and transport in her opening statement. Obviously it is difficult and it puts pressure on them every day. Can you tell us what that pressure might involve?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** Assisted travel is usually granted if the kids are young—year 7 and year 8—have a secondary disability like autism, or an intellectual disability. But as the kids get older they do not travel very successfully on assisted travel. They travel long distances. Our kids come from Helensburgh in the north to Kiama so it is difficult to put them on the train and they are likely to get into strife.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Rather than talk to the Committee about generalities will you talk about how assisted travel works and give us a specific instance of assisted travel—not mentioning the child's name—and how it did not work and they get into trouble.

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** We have a boy who attends year 10 and he is doing Pathways, so this is his second year in year 10. He has autism spectrum disorder. He gets on the train with our students and he is victimised from the time he gets on the train to the time he gets off. He has a very bad temper. Yesterday he assaulted one of our girls who was victimising him on the train. That whole incident will be something I will deal with when I get back to school today. Because he is older we are trying to transition him. If we had the facility we would put our kids on a bus. Some of the SSPs have their own buses and they can drive their kids to and from school. They are travelling from Kiama to north Wollongong, which is a significant trip for a young person. It is always fraught with danger. There will be problems that will impact on somebody's school attendance.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** You probably see that when the kids come to class. If a child has had a 40 minute session of bullying before starting class that is a pretty harsh start to the day for the child and for you.

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** Yes.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Do you see that?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** Yes, absolutely. We are often putting the kids on the train and getting them off the train so that we do not have those issues to and from the school. But you cannot control everything; that is the problem.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Having a bus is one way to tackle it. Is there a better way to tackle that real problem?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** We have to prove that a student needs assisted travel. For our Indigenous kids, in particular, if they knew a bus was picking them up at 8 o'clock in the morning and they just have to walk out to the front and jump on the bus it would be so much better. If we have to ask them to come from Barrack Heights to north Wollongong on a train and a bus that is really difficult for our kids.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Would that set up even be possible, given the distances that you are talking about?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** The disability SSPs have that facility. They can bring kids from long distances. There are a couple of alternative programs being run, particularly by the Catholic Church down here. They are picking their kids up on buses. But, you know, public school students are making their own way. If you have a kid with a behavioural disability going from north Wollongong to Kiama it is really quite difficult.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** For some kids it would be an impossible hurdle. That is an impossible hurdle at the start of a school day.

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** It is really difficult. They often arrive really upset and elevated. We have a full range of kids—from kids with autism spectrum disorder and challenging behaviours to kids who are young offenders. When you put them in the same carriage it is a difficult situation.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Even without a bus is there any suggestion of alternative solutions? Would having a teacher's aide on a particular carriage assist? Has anything like that been tried?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** Yes, except there would be a risk because of some of the students that we educate. Putting one of my staff members out there on their own possibly would not be something that the department would support because of work, health and safety. It is difficult. I can stagger when kids come to and from school. We are doing everything we can around the resources we have to keep kids safe.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Listening to it hopefully with a slightly fresher set of ears, if it is not safe for a teacher why are we putting a bunch of kids in that situation?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** Yes, I know.

**Mr KOTLASH:** We have a problem in my area where we are sending students with severe intellectual and physical disabilities for a 40 minute drive down the Princes Highway to Budawang School. When you talk to Ms Bruffey later on this afternoon you should ask her about this and I am sure she will share it with you, as will Ms Eyland from Havenlee School in Nowra. We send them that way as well. That is onto a pretty rough road and you are talking about kids with fairly severe physical disabilities. If we had a service nearer us that we could access we would probably be able to fill it with kids locally. I am not sure what the taxi bill is but I think it is fairly horrendous. I have not looked at the figures. I look at my figures and think, "Wow, that's a lot of money". If you were to aggregate the amount of money that people are paid to take kids to and from places I think you would find you would almost make the saving.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Maybe a good start would be an audit of the transport fares to see whether it can be more rationally allocated.

**Mr KOTLASH:** I think so.

**The CHAIR:** How do you deal with children with disability and special needs in a mainstream classes? Is it working successfully overall?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** My high school, Figtree High School, has an autism class and a physical disabilities class on site. I think it is working really well. Our school has a fairly significant history of supporting kids with a range of disabilities. I think it works pretty well. I think Every Student, Every School has really had an impact in lifting the level of expertise. When I first started working in special education a lot of people had limited training. Every Student, Every School has given people working as learning support teachers a much broader understanding of a range of disabilities and being able to cater for those in the mainstream classroom. I think it is also lifting the understanding of mainstream teachers to make adjustments and accommodations for students with disabilities in their classes. I see some positives ahead; I really do.

**The CHAIR:** It is great to hear about the positives.

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** I do see some positives that are being created. I think the level of expertise in the whole profession and their orientation towards understanding the impact of disabilities on learning is growing. There is always more work to be done. My team members really try to promote their own knowledge and expertise. Any new team member that comes on board, from our school learning support officers to young teachers, it is all about building knowledge and expertise and understanding why we do what we do and what impact it has on the students' learning.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Kotlash, do you want to add anything?

**Mr KOTLASH:** Yes, I would. At our school we have 12 students who have a diagnosis who are in the mainstream. Some of them would benefit from being in a support class but on the whole they are existing well in the mainstream and accessing the curriculum as they need to. There is a system available for applying

for support funds for students who are in the mainstream—whose parents would rather them access the curriculum in the mainstream setting than in a class placement—integration funding support. That program is fairly tightly regulated and fairly difficult to access. For example, Vincentia High School has 57 students out of their 1,200 who are in mainstream classes who have a diagnosed disability and who suit the access criteria for special education placement, but they do not have any places. They are always full. They have a big need for more classes but that need is not being met currently, even though they have that information that says that we have got these extra students who would benefit from being in a class.

Last year we were in the unpleasant situation of having students who were in special education classes for the duration of their school life moving to high school and moving into a mainstream environment. That is a fairly difficult ask for those students and it has not necessarily gone well because the high school does not have that support. They offer an extra two classes that they fund out of their own funds to try to meet that need in years 7 and 8. It is a transition class for students who have difficulties accessing the mainstream curriculum with the number of rooms they need to travel to and the number of teachers they need to interact with. That is paid out of school funds. But the rest of those 57 students are waiting for support class placements.

**The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES:** Do you have any comments to make in relation to the complaints process, particularly for parents? Have you found that there have been challenges for parents making complaints or has it been quite open, transparent and easy to navigate?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** I find often my students arrive at the end of quite a frustrating journey for some of our parents and so we work really hard on building those relationships. I have to say I do not have a lot of experience with the complaints process because of the work we do with our parents and particularly the non-government organisations that we work with, the care agencies. At the moment we are working with four residential care agencies and we have pretty strong partnerships. I am not an expert in that area.

**The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES:** That is a good thing.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Mr Kotlash, there is the access request process and the terrible acronym ERN, which stands for enrolment and registration number. Can you tell me how that works?

**Mr KOTLASH:** ERN is the main computer system that we use that takes all of the enrolments across the State and puts them on to a database. There is another acronym that no-one in the department knows what it means anymore, it is RSSSP. If you can find an answer to that question that would be great.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** So we have ERN and the access request?

**Mr KOTLASH:** Yes, ERN and the access request process. To start the access request process it needs a person to be able to sit down at a computer system for some hours for each child and put in some details. It then needs to be checked by a classroom teacher. It then needs to be rechecked by the person that originally started the details. It then needs to have input from a school counsellor. It then needs to have input from a district guidance officer, who are now called senior school psychologists. That process has been around for a very long time. What happens after that information is put into a computer is that a person at an office at your district level will aggregate those pieces of paper and then you will have a meeting to discuss which students of those are the priority. Lots of people come to those meetings, lots of people are involved in the process. It is fairly time consuming and it takes up a large portion of my time where I could be off doing other stuff. I think it is an administrative trouble that could be fixed if someone took a look at it and said, "Yeah, that's a crazy system."

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** From the time you start it until the time you get either a successful or unsuccessful outcome, how many hours are we talking about for you and how many days, weeks or months are we talking about for the process?

**Mr KOTLASH:** Usually months for the outcome.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Two or three months?

**Mr KOTLASH:** Perhaps two, depending on the timing. You might be lucky, you might get it in five weeks. Usually it is longer.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** And how many hours of your time?

**Mr KOTLASH:** A lot. I would say I would spend on each access request probably five hours. There would be hours of counsellor time and probably an hour of class teacher time.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** In this two-month process involving multiple hours what are you asking for?

**Mr KOTLASH:** Something easier.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** No, sorry, what is the service you are asking for?

**Mr KOTLASH:** It is just to place a student in a support class. That is what is required. It is a fairly involved process.

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** If I could just add that it is the thing that arrives with your student when they are referred to your service and the quality of the information on the access request is very spare, is the word I could use to best describe it. Hopefully for my setting it is accompanied by a risk assessment and a behaviour management plan.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Hopefully, but how often is it?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** It is better now than it used to be. It used to be that the access request would arrive with a letter that you are placing this student and then you would have to be the detective and go back and try to find out everything you could about them.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** You are at different ends of the same process in some ways. Mr Kotlash is saying it takes a huge amount of time, a huge amount of resources and involves a vast amount of information. You are saying that sometimes you are not getting the key information you want.

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** I do them too. I do them as well.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** What is going wrong?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** I think the format of the access request is pretty basic. There are a lot of boxes to tick and not a lot of information appears on them. It is the way it is done and then you backtrack from there; you ring the people that have worked with the student and get them to comment.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** You almost have to fight the system?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** Yes.

**Mr KOTLASH:** I think sometimes less is more too. If you are a principal or someone and you are filling out an access request for a student that might have a severe behavioural difficulty in your school—if you are a principal and you receive information about a student that has a severe behaviour difficulty and they have some history of violence towards staff you as a principal might want to say, "I don't think I'll have that enrolment."

**The CHAIR:** Thank you both for attending today's hearing. I do not think you took any questions on notice but members may have some additional questions. The secretariat will contact to you in relation to any that may come forward. Thank you for attending.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I will put on notice now could you please give us your thoughts, either collectively or individually, about what steps might be taken to streamline and improve that process so that the time is spent inputting the information that is needed?

**Ms CHRISTOFIDES:** Okay.

**Mr KOTLASH:** Yes. A spreadsheet would be a better bet, I think.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you both.

(The witnesses withdrew)

**CAROLINE THORNTON**, Parent, sworn and examined

**VANESSA COMISKEY**, Parent, sworn and examined

**The CHAIR:** Would you like to start by making a short statement?

**Ms COMISKEY:** "Every child has a different learning style and pace. Each child is unique, not only capable of learning, but also capable of succeeding", written by Robert John Meehan—American educator, author and poet. As a full-time carer, who has been picking up the pieces for an inadequate education system, I have come to realise that it is when we stop believing in children as capable individuals, no matter the severity of their disability, we ultimately fail them. Too many times, the preconceived notions and the ideas about my child's disability greatly impacted on his schooling experiences and made him feel absolutely worthless.

I believe that all kids have the ability to reach their full potential, and I believe that a person's attitude can make a difference to a child's life. You know I keep thinking to myself: what is the one thing that would have made all the difference to my son's schooling experience and potentially helped us to avoid the circumstances that we endure today? And I have to be honest, it all keeps coming back to attitudes. I cannot tell you how many times people said to me, "Oh well, I have been doing the autism training" and "I have been attending courses on autism", but it never once made a difference to their attitudes.

I feel that we need a top-down approach, of people being made more accountable and responsible for their actions and attitudes, starting at the very top of our political system. I feel that if we want to change the culture within some schools, then it is crucial to shift the attitudes first and then ensure that we are picking the right people for the right jobs, while eliminating those who are counter-productive to the system. In saying that, I cannot stress enough just how important it is to begin to shift the attitudes of seeing kids with disabilities as challenging and difficult, but instead to begin to see them as individuals who just need a little more assistance in order to reach their potential.

It makes me absolutely sick to my stomach to know that all too often kids with disabilities are being horrendously abused, bullied, isolated, prevented from distance education and/or discriminated against within our school system, and often to the point of suicide and self-harming. To make it worse, parents are left with no other choice but to withdraw their kids from mainstream education, where they find themselves often having to rely on one income and also having to decide between either home-school or distance education, the last one being the hardest to access due to departmental gatekeeping.

I truly feel that you could throw all of the money and resources in the world at the system, but unless the people in charge start shifting their attitudes and funding is used wisely and appropriately, it is not going to make much of an impact. From personal experience, the education system here in New South Wales leaves a lot to be desired when it comes to transparency, accountability and responsibility of those in charge and, without a major shift in the way that kids with disabilities are perceived and/or treated, the struggle will continue on. As the saying goes, a bad attitude is like a flat tyre: you cannot go anywhere unless you change it. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much for that. Ms Thornton?

**Ms THORNTON:** Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you all today. I am a full-time carer for my son who attends an SSP school in regional New South Wales. We moved from Sydney 1½ years ago where he attended an SSP there. We moved our family for a better quality of life; we wanted our children to have space, a community, animals and a way of life that my husband and I grew up in. We researched our move and knew that we would require more work and investment of time for my son in terms of travel, better access to health care, travel for better therapy and access to information from qualified and seasonal professionals.

We knew that the local SSP was not as well equipped across all aspects of resources. It was very obvious from our conversations with the principal and, we thought, our therapist's input past experience, that it would have little effect on our son's learning. Sending my son to school is not a glorified babysitting service; he has the capacity to learn and we have good expectations for him. He is never going to be a brain surgeon, but that is okay. We have seen the best of what teachers and schools offer and we have seen how lack of resources and teacher and principal resources can impact the school and children. I would hope that the disparity between rural and city school resources and funding is addressed by this committee and that grassroots recommendations are put in place to ensure that all students' life needs and capabilities are met. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much.

**The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES:** Thank you very much for coming today and for sharing your experiences. You commented about distance education. Our previous witness highlighted the importance of this particular area and I would like to know a little bit more about your experience with your son.

**Ms COMISKEY:** Distance education has saved my son's life. The teachers have been amazing; I cannot fault them. The flexibility of their programming and the adjustments they made to my son really impacted the way in which he was able to experience his schooling career, because up until that point he was really hesitant and he was really down on himself about his abilities and his competence. Distance education provided a way in which he could learn at his own pace, in his own time, and we were able to adapt a schedule to his experience so that he could—I am sorry, I am a little emotional. My son's experience with distance education has been absolutely remarkable. He has come a very long way in the time that he left mainstream to where he is up to now.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Did you hear the evidence of Robyn Christofides, the teacher, earlier?

**Ms COMISKEY:** I did.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Did it sort of ring a bell with you? Did that resonate with you about distance education?

**Ms COMISKEY:** Absolutely. I was sitting there seeing red because I could not believe that kids would be prevented from distance education. It makes me really angry that kids cannot get access to distance education. From what I have seen from my son, it does actually make a difference. If they do not fit into a mainstream system they are able to then access the curriculum and work at their own pace and, like she said, to fill in learning gaps and help them to catch up on where they need be and also move forward with their learning.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Almost structured so kids can learn at their own pace.

**Ms COMISKEY:** Yes, very structured.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** And they do not miss anything? Is that right?

**Ms COMISKEY:** My son gets sent work home—they get parcels, and he basically fills them out according to the lesson plan that we have prepared for him during the day and he can work at it. He does not have an overload of work per day, so that works out for him. Say I do two lessons, I do English and Maths, he will sit down and he will have the phone lesson with the teacher and they will interact with the work for the day, and then he will go off and finish his title pages, which is the booklets, and then we will send them all back at the end of the week for feedback from the teachers.

**The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES:** Ms Thornton, do you have any comments in relation to distance education?

**Ms THORNTON:** I have not. I suppose I do take my hat off to parents that do it—I could not do it. When we chose to move from Sydney—we always knew that Sydney was not the place for our family—we did look at far out where I am from and we just could not do it; it is not possible when you realise what access to resources you have in Sydney. It is almost like a bubble that you have in Sydney. You do not know what you are missing until you actually investigate what is out there, and there is not. We are only an hour and a half from Sydney, but I drive every week to Sydney because I know that the therapy services there are so much better than what I have in my local area. Up until the NDIS they were non-existent. Thankfully, now with the funding that the NDIS has, there are occupational therapists there to assist my son in that aspect. But there is no way that I could do it; I do not have the strength to be able to do that, and I take my hat off, I really do.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Can you just tell us about that? As the NDIS change is coming in obviously that does not impact on the schooling environment in important ways, but it is sitting there alongside. What changes does that mean for your lives?

**Ms THORNTON:** I do not think that the NDIS and the education department for my son, who is severely impaired, can be separated because you have little things like an occupational therapist that we have worked with for the last six years. He has to work out; he has not got the strength to be able to cut with scissors. To have a specialist able to say, "He needs a Peta scissors to be able to cut that", the teacher does not have that specialist knowledge. The teachers at his school are fantastic and can teach him, but to be able to have the capacity to be able to understand that he needs to be able to cut with scissors, to cut paper in a different way, which therefore is increasing his strength—which may not mean that he is going to write, but it is all of those other things that are moving on that will help in the classroom. So I think having those funds and having

qualified professionals assisting schools, especially schools for specific purposes [SSPs], which is the perspective I am coming from, is crucial.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Ms Comiskey, just going back to the distance education, your son's school career started about a decade ago, is that right?

**Ms COMISKEY:** In 2007 he started school.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** That is a decade ago, disturbingly. Do you think that distance education being delivered in the classroom might have helped?

**Ms COMISKEY:** Absolutely.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Do you want to tell me about that?

**Ms COMISKEY:** Absolutely. I feel that when he was sitting in the classroom, looking at the four walls and falling behind, he was expected to keep up to date with what the other kids were doing, even though he was not fully understanding or comprehending the lessons. And it would have benefited him to have a little bit more individualised learning that he could keep at his own pace, the way he has been doing at home. If he could have had that in the classroom, I think it would have prevented us from having to take him out of the mainstream system and having to do the catch-up with distance education at home.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Because when he was coming home from school in his first few years at school he would come home very upset.

**Ms COMISKEY:** Absolutely.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Do you want to describe that?

**Ms COMISKEY:** Yes. My son would barely make it to the car. He would burst into tears in an instant and go into complete meltdown mode, in tears and frustration, and he would have trouble getting his words out and I would have to initially just calm him down and say, "It is okay, I am going to listen. What has happened?" He would say, "Mum, this has happened, Mum, the teacher didn't teach me this. Mum, I didn't understand this". It would just escalate because he felt like he was not being listened to. He felt like he was just sitting in the classroom, he was falling behind in his work, he was frustrated. He really wanted to learn. He really, really wanted to learn. So he would be in absolute hysterics on a daily basis. It is not only that. On the weekends, on a Sunday when he knew school was coming, the meltdowns would start.

And then school holidays we would have no meltdowns and then the minute he knew school was coming again, the meltdowns would start again, "Mum, I don't want to go to school, mum". He would just have all these things in his head, "Mum, I'm scared, I don't want to do this". We were just constantly battling with his meltdowns and his frustrations. I actually tried my best. I sat down with an autism specialist. I said, "This is my problem; how do I fix this?" She gave me some really good strategies. I took that back to the school and the school just looked at me as though, "How dare you tell me how to do my job?" He never implemented those strategies, even though it was not going to cost them a cent. I thought they were very simple strategies. That just was reflective of the whole experience of his schooling life. No matter what I suggested or how I tried to work with the school, they just would not change.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** You both talked about the culture and the gap between your expectations—putting in all this work with your child and the expectations of the school system. What do you think would make a difference to the attitudes that you are talking about? What is the way out?

**Ms THORNTON:** I do not know whether there is a difference in expectations. For instance, my son has a vision impairment. We spent just on \$400 to get an assessment done. It was a very, very detailed assessment and it was by a reputable organisation, I think it was the Royal Blind Society in Sydney. We brought that to the school. We had the assessment done, we were not given itinerant support for his vision impairment which was confirmed by the Royal Blind Society. That was fine. We took all their recommendations on board, which was a 10-page report. We took it to the teacher. The first teacher, in our first school in Sydney, took everything on board. All of the things, like everything needed to be on black. There was no visual clutter. The second school, we took the same report. We said, "This is what he needs. He does not qualify for itinerant support. We have everything there that this person has detailed for you. Can we please have it in his classroom?" It is a battle for me to actually say, "Can you just get rid of this clutter off his desk, please?"

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** For the benefit of Hansard, you shook your head in the middle of your response. So you did not get it?

**Ms THORNTON:** Sorry.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Where did you go when the teacher said, "No"? Both of you are saying at different times that you were told no. Where did you go after that?

**Ms THORNTON:** I persisted.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Was it the same teacher? Did you know that there was a complaints mechanism? Did you escalate it up to the principal? Where did you go?

**Ms THORNTON:** No, because I suppose that is my attitude. I felt that this teacher was an intelligent and reasonable person that I could talk to and rationalise with. I did not feel that I needed to go to the principal at that stage. We have worked through it. We have since got a speech therapist who has said, "This is what he needs", and who has gone into the classroom and said, "Hey, let's implement this" and there have been results.

**Ms COMISKEY:** I apologise; I meant to say after my introduction that I wanted to table some confidential documents. I would like to request that they be kept confidential. I have copies for the Committee. I apologise for that; I just realised. Could you please repeat the question?

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** When you got an initial "No", did you know how to contest that? Did you contest it?

**Ms COMISKEY:** I did.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Was it a fruitful process?

**Ms COMISKEY:** I went to the department. No, it was a very fruitless process. I went to the department. All I knew was to go back to the department and say, "Hey, this is what I am not happy with and this is what I would like done" and nothing would ever really improve from that. So I was not made aware that there was a process of complaints above that. I tried to do what I could do with the principals. They would say "No", so I would take it to the department and say, "Well, I believe that this needs to be done", and it was not.

**Ms THORNTON:** Just to add to that point, I knew that there was a complaints process. It was futile in my opinion. I think the process that you go through is just putting pen to paper and nothing more. So I would not even consider it.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** You see, in parliamentary inquiries we get parents like you who are highly motivated and articulate. Obviously you are the parents who contest and advocate for your kids. But there are many other kids whose parents do not have the capacity to do what you do. In your observation, what do you see happening for them?

**Ms THORNTON:** I have joined the parents and citizens association. I know there are parents who do not have the capacity to do it, in whatever form. I try as much as I can to interact. That is what I think a school community is about; making sure that everybody does their work. I know that there are children who are going to fall through the gaps because of their home life. I would like to think that a principal and a teacher would address them. As I think one of the principals said before, the teachers at our school will feed and clothe students. It happens so regularly.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Do you think they are given enough assistance for that?

**Ms THORNTON:** No.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Do you think there really should be a proactive obligation on the part of the department to be looking after and advocating for the children and not just leaving it to parents?

**Ms COMISKEY:** Absolutely.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** How do we get there?

**Ms THORNTON:** That is a really good question.

**Ms COMISKEY:** Yes.

**Ms THORNTON:** I do not think it is simple.

**Ms COMISKEY:** Yes, I think it is very complex. I get a lot of people contacting me that have that problem of not being able to vocalise their concerns to the schools. They are at an absolute desperation rate and they will say to me, "How do I get into distance education, because this is not working". I tell them my story and how I got my son into distance education but that is not always guaranteed. I have heard some really horrific



stories where I feel that the abuse would be at a level where it would make a normally functioning adult want to commit suicide, and they still deny distance education. It makes me really angry. I try to do my best to tell people, "These are things that I have done. Maybe you can try them". I have also formed a number of communities and I get involved in communities and try to help people as best I can. But if they do not have the capacity to go to the principal and make complaints and stuff like that, it is not going to go very far. I fear for the kids that are going to fall through the cracks.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** How do we get the word out to parents who are able to advocate in the way in which you do that bits of the system are working and responding well and that teachers have the knowledge to get the system into other schools?

**Ms THORNTON:** One of the things I have seen is that transparency is needed in the Department of Education. That is clear. From the moment you want to enrol your child—it was clear for us the path for our child—we were lucky we had a beautiful early intervention service that actually helped us on that pathway. I see time and again people having problems with the process. It is the same thing about the complaints process. What do you do if you are not happy in the classroom? Do you go to the principal? What happens if you have an ineffectual principal? I think it is a key theme across the board. If you have a good school you have a good principal. What happens then? There is no clear process in any aspect of the Department of Education for parents to follow. You can be the smartest person on the face of the earth but you do not know the process.

**Ms COMISKEY:** I have something to add to that. Just out of curiosity I went onto the department's website and had a look at the distance education enrolment procedures for 2017. Although I feel the department has put a bit of information in there, it is not clearcut for parents as to the steps they can take to get into distance education. I compared that to the Australian Capital Territory enrolment procedures, which were a lot more clearcut. It said to parents this is where you go, this is who you talk to, this is how long before you can expect a response and this is the follow up procedures. I felt that was very interesting. There are a lot of the complaints from people who are saying, "We do not know what to do in the system, so how do we get out?" There is nothing clearcut in the policy that I have been able to observe that tells people step-by-step what to do, how to do it and when to do it.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** You think that is a pretty good place for us to look?

**Ms COMISKEY:** Absolutely.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** For parents there is a clearer set of expectations?

**Ms COMISKEY:** Yes. I have looked at other departmental policies as well and I feel it is more tailored to staff needs than what it is to parents needs. There are staff toolkits on the website that would be valuable for parents but parents cannot access them. How do we get that extra information? They are not being transparent in providing that information. How do we, as parents, then empower ourselves to say to the department, "Well, you are going against your own policies here", which I have had to do a couple of times. They have argued the fact and turned it around and said, "No, you are incorrect, because this is the way we are interpreting it". They need to be a little more clearcut in their policies.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Given that it is difficult to find that information, where do you go to find out what you might expect?

**Ms COMISKEY:** I talk to people. Autism communities and people that are going through the same thing are more of a source of information than the department.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Facebook and phone?

**Ms COMISKEY:** Absolutely, even face-to-face conversations. I have had a couple of people say, "Vanessa, are you aware this actually exists?" I have said, "Why hasn't the department told me this exists? Why am I hearing it from you?" It is because they have been through the same things I have been through.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** You are in these communities now?

**Ms COMISKEY:** Yes.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** And made those links and built those networks. What can we do for parents who might not have built the links you have got?

**Ms THORNTON:** It is a matter of looking at the grass routes and where are our communities based. In Sydney we had a fantastic school community. We had a very proactive principal who ensured that this happened. The parent participation was fantastic. We had a wonderful Facebook page where we shared

resources. We did not have that in our new school and I established that. Now we are sharing resources such as if there is a vacancy in a special needs surfing school on the coast. What happens if there is a vacancy here and there. More so in terms of what happens within the Department of Education. I suppose it is a matter of talking to people within our community. We live in a small community; everybody knows everybody. That is why we want to handle it on a person-to-person basis.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Do you think that there should be proactive outreach from the department if they know that there are places such as the basin area where there are a large number of kids who have special needs? Rather than wait for the parents to approach the department they could proactively go and set up information stalls. Do you think people would access these?

**Ms THORNTON:** Yes, I think probably online is a more effective thing to do. Having the information so if you are up with your child at 2 o'clock in the morning, like most parents of a child with autism are, and you are just waiting for them to go back to bed, you can look online.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** You have good literacy skills. You have good internet skills. But not every parent who has special needs kids will have those skills. Putting it on a website is not always the best way.

**Ms THORNTON:** Okay, but then you are looking at social skills and the amount of people coming to school events and socialising with other parents. I think you might find the same case as when you are looking at people accessing the internet. Yes, it might do well for one group to have it on the internet and it might also be looking at how can we empower school councillors to be able to say, "Is every parent coping? Does every parent have access to the National Disability Insurance Scheme? Do you understand what is going on?" I think there are two levels that you are looking at.

**Ms COMISKEY:** I agree.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I have one set of questions about the barriers. Ms Comiskey, when did you remove your child from the formal school setting?

**Ms COMISKEY:** End of year 5.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** And when you did that, is that when you first requested distance education?

**Ms COMISKEY:** Yes, it was my first attempt.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** It did not succeed at first. Tell me how you went about requesting and ultimately succeeding?

**Ms COMISKEY:** I basically had a friend who had problems trying to access distance education with her son who had autism and she told me about the processes she went through and she gave me information to put it all in writing and contact the department directly and tell them exactly what was going on. I told them that my son was suicidal and self-harming and I no longer wanted him at school. I put it in writing and said, "I now request distance education because of the circumstances. I no longer feel it is safe that my son go back to school".

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Did you know the criteria at that time?

**Ms COMISKEY:** Absolutely not.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** You just had a punt?

**Ms COMISKEY:** Yes, I just had a punt.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** So then what happened?

**Ms COMISKEY:** They replied and said to me that it would have to go to a panel to be approved. I said to them, "No, I am sorry but you are not going to sit there and tell me that my son will have to go back to school if somebody does not approve his placement". It was not in his best interests, it was not in my best interests that he was to step foot back into school. My son was beside himself. I cannot describe how bad he got. I did not feel that they were doing enough at the school. I was pushed to the brink and I said to the Department of Education, "You either put him in distance education or I will take legal action. If something happens to my son because you forced him back into school and you would not listen, I am going to hold you to that". I forced their hand and I said, "This is not good enough. It has never been good enough. I am beyond it. My son is beyond it. We now need something else because this is not working".

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Then what happened?

**Ms COMISKEY:** They then tried to argue the point with me and tried to give me the eleventh placement of putting my son in a special needs unit at the same school that had just driven him to suicide. I spoke to the psychologist and the paediatrician. The psychologist actually laughed and said basically, "It is not good enough". I cannot remember what I wrote in my submission. She supported my decision for distance education. She said that no parent in their right mind would put their son back into a school that has just caused that much harm.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Same environment?

**Ms COMISKEY:** Same environment. She was surprised that is all they could come up with.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Then what happened?

**Ms COMISKEY:** Then I said, "No, this is not good enough". I told the department. I got in touch with the absenteeism officer and I said to them, "I want my son in distance education". He questioned me and said, "Do you realise that distance education is hard?" I said, "How is that your problem?" That is not what my problem was. My problem was my son's safety and trying to get him to learn in an environment where he was going to be happy. I pushed the point and they relented and allowed me to sign the papers for distance education.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** How long did that process take?

**Ms COMISKEY:** Five days.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Five fairly intense days?

**Ms COMISKEY:** Five pretty intense days. I gave them a serious email and I said, "I am not taking no for an answer. I will do what I can to get my son in distance education."

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Have you told other parents that the threat of litigation is what it requires to get distance education?

**Ms COMISKEY:** Absolutely. I tell them straight up.

**Ms THORNTON:** Everybody knows that.

**Ms COMISKEY:** Yes, if you want to be heard you have to threaten legal action, because I believe that if my son was forced back into school, he could have been doing more self-harm or hurting someone else, because he was that desperate to be heard. He was not being listened to.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Now do you understand what the criteria are to get him into this education?

**Ms COMISKEY:** To some extent. Like I said, their procedures are not exactly transparent so far as telling the parents how to do that, but that is only because I have actually looked at their website.

**The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES:** Ms Thornton, you went from the metropolitan setting to a regional setting. I am interested in the transition process, particularly the ability to transfer records, how much of that had to be done by parents versus what support you were given by the department, or was it a seamless process?

**Ms THORNTON:** It was relatively seamless in the end, but I knew the system and I think that is the key. We also had a very good principal who did a lot of work behind the scenes for us. He told us what we needed to do. It was not just a matter of, "Oh, my husband is getting transferred next week; we have to move." I think it would have been very different. We planned this, and we put a lot of thought into our move. With a child with special needs, it probably took us a good six or eight years to work out where we wanted to move in New South Wales, because we had to take into consideration our health and access to the major Sydney hospitals, but in respect of what we wanted to do, we had a look at the support unit in our local area and at the SSP in our area, and we spoke to both principals. They were very approachable. I could not have complained about either one of them and the reception that we received at both schools. We did walk into schools and thought, "Wow, we are going to be up for more work moving", and we knew that, but in respect of getting the paperwork done, the principal at our old school in Metropolitan Sydney handled it. In respect of what I have had to deal with, yes, it was seamless, but it took about six months.

**Ms COMISKEY:** I have one last comment. I have been looking at previous evidence where it was said that it is a lucky dip with schools. I have actually found that. I have a child who is now in mainstream and he is in a lot better school than previously. It comes down to the principal and the culture of that school. I have had two bad experiences with schools in the same area, but the one my child is at, I believe the difference is the principal and the attitudes in that school, and the culture that they aim for. I feel that there is actually a big difference. There are no minimum standards. I feel they need to be looked at. You should not have to pick and choose a school in order to get your child looked after. It really frustrates me and makes me angry that parents have to go to some extent to try to find the right school for their child and then when they cannot find it, then they have to resort to distance education or homeschool. It really makes me angry.

**The CHAIR:** I thank you both for being here. I know it has been very hard for you. I thank you for sharing your pain. I feel it, and I am sure everyone else here does as well. Thank you also for sharing your determination for a better outcome for your children. I hope we get a better outcome for them.

**Ms COMISKEY:** Thank you. I really hope so.

**Ms THORNTON:** Thank you.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I may have some questions on notice about that material you just provided.

**Ms COMISKEY:** Absolutely. I apologise if I did not answer anything.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** No, it has been really helpful.

**The CHAIR:** I do not think we have any questions on notice, but some of us may have additional questions and the secretariat will be in touch with you.

**Ms COMISKEY:** Happy to help.

**(The witnesses withdrew)**

**KIM BULKELEY**, Industry Adviser: Education and Disability, Occupational Therapy Australia, sworn and examined

**ANITA VOLKERT**, National Manager: Professional Standards and Representation, Occupational Therapy Australia, sworn and examined

**The CHAIR:** Would you like to commence by making a short statement?

**Ms VOLKERT:** Yes. I will commence the opening statement, Kim will say a little bit and then it will come back to me. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am the National Manager for Professional Standards and Representation with Occupational Therapy Australia. I am joined by Kim Bulkeley from the University of Sydney's Faculty of Health Sciences, who is also an education and disability industry adviser for Occupational Therapy Australia. Occupational Therapy Australia, often called OTA, is the professional association and peak representative body for occupational therapists in Australia.

As of December 2016 there were more than 5,000 nationally registered occupational therapists working across the government, non-government, private and community sectors in New South Wales. Occupational therapists are allied health professionals who take a whole-person approach to enable and facilitate clients to participate in the meaningful and productive activities of everyday life. Occupational therapists are an integral part of learning support teams for students with disability and special needs in schools across New South Wales. We bring a unique and specialised perspective to maximising participation in the curriculum when students encounter barriers to their learning. Occupational therapists also provide support and training to school staff targeted to individual students, as well as generic capacity building across a school.

Occupational therapists can assist students with disability to develop new skills or improve existing skills, such as concentrating in group activities or managing their wheelchair in a busy school environment. They work with the student and teacher to modify the occupation or school activity to ensure that the student is able to participate effectively at school. Occupational therapists also prescribe assistive technology and modify the environment to enable students with disabilities to perform tasks independently and to create an inclusive learning environment for those with special needs.

**Dr BULKELEY:** Occupational therapists work alongside other professionals in interdisciplinary teams in schools, so we are not the main professional in schools but we are an important part of interdisciplinary support teams. However, we found that occupational therapists in New South Wales currently face a number of barriers to providing services to students with disability in a school environment. These include inconsistent access to students with disability at school, as well as a reduction in the provision of training to staff teams who co-design and implement individual student support programs. Many teachers feel ill-equipped to support the needs of students with disability, and rely on a team approach, including occupational therapists, to develop individualised student programs. The area of behaviour support and reduction in the use of restrictive practices for students with a disability is one area of expertise where occupational therapists are underutilised.

Access to occupational therapists in rural, regional and remote parts of the State is a challenge for residents in these locations and, while not confined to schools, it impacts significantly on students. There is some potential for schools in remote communities to provide a technology link for students to access remotely located therapy services; however this is as yet an unrealised potential at this point. Occupational Therapy Australia's [OTA] submission to the inquiry also touched upon how policy reform in the disability sector has impacted access to therapy supports in schools.

The introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme [NDIS] has created uncertainty around the interface with school disability support funding. It is unclear how therapy services to increase access to the curriculum for individual students will be delivered when the block funding that is currently supplied to services that provide disability services will cease under the NDIS. Our submission called for a coordinated interdepartmental approach between the NDIS and various stakeholders at a State level, who are involved with education service delivery, and therapy providers, so that there is a better access for other students in that regard. There is a clear need to provide policy and funding clarity around access to curriculum-related therapy services for students with disability in educational settings.

**Ms VOLKERT:** To conclude, I would like to reaffirm OTA's strong belief that occupational therapists play a key role in providing services to students with disabilities and special needs in schools. Our submission makes a number of recommendations about how the provision of occupational therapy services can

be enhanced to enable students to achieve their educational goals. We thank you again for the opportunity to be here today and look forward to answering your questions.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** A submission from speech pathologists in Newcastle said that Victoria has a really good system. It basically allocates speech pathologists to schools and that is a constant resource that can be drawn upon. Is there a similar situation in relation to occupational therapists? Is that where you would like us to get to?

**Ms VOLKERT:** That is definitely where we would like you to get to. It is certainly not the situation in New South Wales today. We do not have any OTs as part of the educational system working within the Department of Education so to speak. Queensland uses that model for occupational therapy. We have approximately 63 to 68 full-time OTs working within the education department or system in Queensland. That model works extremely effectively and it is considered to be the gold standard model.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Are those occupational therapists allocated a geographic patch?

**Ms VOLKERT:** That is my understanding. They are not necessarily in every specific school but they are working within geographic patches. The principal, teachers and other allied health assistants who work within that school and the parents and children can call upon the occupational therapist for support.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** From your academic and professional experience should we be looking to Queensland?

**Dr BULKELEY:** Being an integral part of the education team is absolutely key. I think that is the way to achieve that by having allied health professionals, not only occupational therapists, embedded into the learning support team. They are not needed in every school. I think a regional access is one way to provide that and it is probably more realistic. But it certainly embeds them into the culture and thinking of an education system if they are available in that way.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Is the client-focus funding model from the NDIS and the potential loss of block funding a problem in that regard, or is it a potential positive?

**Dr BULKELEY:** I think it has opportunities to be positive but the reality is the number of students with additional needs and disability in the New South Wales education system. The majority of those students will not be eligible for NDIS support. Only around 30 per cent or something of students with additional needs and disability will be eligible for NDIS anyway. Of those students there is some potential for that to be extremely positive and really supporting individual needs. But there is a significant problem. The lack of clarity around responsibility is wide and I am fearful that will be a place where people will fall through the cracks even more than is happening now.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** If it is not getting to 70 per cent that is a large crack, is it not, in the education setting?

**Dr BULKELEY:** Those students should be managed under the department's obligation in the Disability Discrimination Act to provide reasonable supports. They are outside the remit of the NDIS.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** From the experience of your profession how is it working at the moment?

**Ms VOLKERT:** Blurred, muddied and patchy is probably how I would describe it at the moment. Dr Bulkeley can also comment on this. Our members are working in a variety of services and locations. We have members with the ADHC service, the outgoing government services who provide community health supports to schools and to children with disability. We have private providers. We have non-government providers all coming into schools to provide services around individual students usually. The transition to NDIS for some of those students is muddy and complex. Some of our community health support OTs do not know whether they will be able to access schools anymore and they are unclear on what ground they would be coming in and whose package would be funding that.

Some of our private providers find that schools are unclear about who is going to provide that support; whether they are going to have a range of providers coming in to service a range of children's needs; or whether that service is going to be provided by one organisation, a private practice or a non-government organisation where the expertise might not suit every child in that school who has need. Also, you start to lose that sense of a whole school approach when you have a patchy, bitty provision coming in around particular need.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Potentially we might have four or five OTs coming and doing individual things for individual students for one class?

**Ms VOLKERT:** Yes, that is right.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** That would be a terribly poor outcome resource-wise?

**Dr BULKELEY:** Absolutely.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Is that the pathway we are potentially going down?

**Dr BULKELEY:** Absolutely. The other thing to point out is that that larger group, the group that will not be NDIS participants from all the projections, are often also serviced by health therapists. So they might be students with learning difficulties or milder problems—ADHD, dyslexia and those kinds of other conditions. So they will continue to be serviced by Health but there will be this plethora of potential providers approaching schools. We have heard of this already from some of our members. One school ended up saying, "No, we are not having therapists come into the school anymore; it is too disruptive for the classroom."

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** We can deal with one, we can deal with two, but we cannot deal with five?

**Dr BULKELEY:** You have to provide the services out of context, which is anathema to where people are needing this kind of support. So coordination around that is really problematic.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** How much of that lies with the profession and how much of that lies with the department?

**Dr BULKELEY:** The profession has very little opportunity to manage that. We certainly will be looking at continuing professional development to try to make sure that our members have the skills to be aware of these issues and to try to manage them as best they can. But the reality is the person will get their individual funding and they choose their provider. The profession has no role in that.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** As the peak body, has your organisation approached the various education departments around the country and said, "We want to sit down and work out a best practice model. These are the pressures." I am not being critical if you have not.

**Dr BULKELEY:** No.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Do you think that might be a good starting point?

**Ms VOLKERT:** It may well be. We do submit where we can.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** You are here today.

**Ms VOLKERT:** As we have done here. So we do engage in most kinds of lobbying and advocacy opportunities wherever we can. To my knowledge we have not approached individual education departments to ask for that. We would love to do that. In terms of your question around how much of these issues lie with the profession, we do as Occupational Therapy Australia, as the peak body, have a good practice guide to working with children. We do recommend a whole school approach and not an individualised approach for our profession and to really think about ensuring that we meet the needs of the whole school and the whole classroom when we go into work in schools.

**Dr BULKELEY:** We are engaged at a national level with Allied Health Professions Australia [AHPA] around NDIS issues and this has been raised as one of those things.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Presumably it varies State to State quite a lot?

**Dr BULKELEY:** It is different. In Queensland, for example, they have school-based teams so it is not so much of an issue there. In parts of Victoria with OT it is more established with speech in Victoria.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Do you think one potential recommendation this Committee could make would be that a roundtable be held with the various allied health professionals and the department to work out a best practice transition to the NDIS and best practice provision of allied health assistance within schools as a starting point at least?

**Dr BULKELEY:** Absolutely. I think it is not just about the professional associations; it is the providers. There is Health, for example, some other peak organisations around disability service providers and some of the allied health associations, of course, but Health is a major player in the provision of this too.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I have just floated that to you now. You might want to think about if a roundtable or some other formal recommendation might be a way of bringing you, speech pathologists and others together with the department to try to nut out these sector-wide issues.

**Ms VOLKERT:** I would certainly support that from the association. I think that would be a great movement forward.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** In your submission I was particularly interested in the recommendation about occupational therapists being engaged where restrictive or exclusionary practices are being applied. We have had some examples of that provided to the Committee, including some pretty concerning ones. Some have been in public and some in private. How often would it be the case that in practice in a school environment occupational therapists are involved in this process at the moment?

**Dr BULKELEY:** Ageing, Disability and Home Care have some specialist behaviour support teams and those teams would be called upon. I could not give you an instance of numbers but there is some question around what is going to happen with those interdisciplinary behaviour support teams going forward with the NDIS. In terms of a view around the scrutiny and aspirations of the department around use of restrictive and exclusionary practices, in other areas where I have worked in disability services any restrictive practice has had to have external scrutiny. That does not happen in schools. The aspiration is to have zero restrictive and exclusionary practices rather than it being seen as one of many options to respond to challenging behaviour.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Presumably this would be a way to apply some general pressure where, if that is the path they are going down, there is some scrutiny and expertise brought to bear.

**Dr BULKELEY:** And an interdisciplinary perspective of the functions of that behaviour. Rather than seeing it as naughty behaviour, there are other things that are being communicated by that behaviour and other causes for that behaviour that mean an occupational therapist might have a different view that can contribute to a better individualised outcome.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** But how realistic is it given some of what has been described to us where there are rolling problems over the course of the school day? There can be tens or maybe up to hundreds of incidents in a school environment. How realistic is it to have this sort of engagement?

**Dr BULKELEY:** It is not that it is on every occasion that it happens, it is just that it is recorded and there is a proactive approach. Once a series or an incidence of challenging behaviour occurs where a restrictive practice is applied then that is reviewed and some solutions are developed that are alternatives to that in a kind of hierarchy: you do this first, you do that next, you do that next and you get to the restrictive practice as your last option. That whole behaviour strategy then becomes last resort. There is that external scrutiny and if it is not working it is then reviewed. None of the ways of avoiding getting to restrictive practices are working so we have to review that, let us look at that from an interdisciplinary perspective.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** What is the best first step in this space? Looking at your recommendation, how could we get this started?

**Dr BULKELEY:** In disability accommodation services, for example, any incidence of restrictive practice is reported and then that is reviewed by a group that then looks at the approaches that have been taken around that. There is a restrictive practice panel in that system.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** In one recommendation you have talked about the accreditation process working in the Australian Capital Territory. Will you tell us quickly about that and what impact you think that might have in New South Wales? How does this improve things?

**Ms VOLKERT:** The issue we were picking up on there was the amount of replication across services of OTs having to continually retrain or re-provide examples of Working with Children Checks and police checks and so forth as they enter each different school. We have examples of our members having to do that across 17 schools, 20 schools, 25 schools, et cetera, every single time they enter a school premises. We understand the need for risk checking, of course.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Sorry, but every time?

**Ms VOLKERT:** The first time. Thank you for picking me up on that. It is the first time that they enter those premises. The ACT runs their system slightly differently. Dr Bulkeley can probably speak to that better than I can, but we are aware that their system works much more effectively and it is much more the provision of a card or a number where that checking process happens in one instance and then your number or your card provides you that access.



**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** The check is there but it cuts out a whole lot of work both for the school and the provider?

**Dr BULKELEY:** Absolutely. Everybody is not having to do this continual checking. It is a similar system to our student placement system with Health. They have a place where all the students are registered, all their Working with Children Check things are all approved in there once and then all the different hospitals, et cetera, can go and check that that student is okay.

**The CHAIR:** In your submission you mentioned inadequate teacher training. You are talking about special education teachers and not mainstream teachers. Will you elucidate on that for me, please?

**Dr BULKELEY:** Some of our members have made us aware that in special schools and special education facilities they have seen a drop off in the number of teachers that have special education training.

**The CHAIR:** But they have done a qualification and are qualified to be a special education teacher?

**Dr BULKELEY:** No. They are a teacher but they have not got the special education qualifications.

**The CHAIR:** You are talking about a mainstream teacher?

**Dr BULKELEY:** Who is in a special education environment.

**The CHAIR:** They are in that role but they do not have the qualification.

**Dr BULKELEY:** Or the extra skills.

**The CHAIR:** Because usually you have to have that and then you can gain your qualification as a special education teacher. I was wondering how they could be in that role without the qualification.

**Dr BULKELEY:** My understanding is it is not a requirement. Again, that is not my area of expertise but that was something that was reported to us from members. That means there is a greater need for support from disability-specific professionals like occupational therapists because the teachers are starting from a lower base. When they have special education training they have more insights into some of the particular needs of students with disability, but when they do not have that special education training it means there is a lot more need for upskilling and support for those teachers.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** We have largely focused on the State school system. Are there the same issues in independent schools and the Catholic education system or are they different?

**Dr BULKELEY:** In terms of access to therapy it is the same, very patchy. I have a little bit more to do with rural independent Catholic schools and there is not a system at all that facilitates that so it just depends on the town.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Does that kind of sum up the situation: there is not a system?

**Dr BULKELEY:** I think so.

**Ms VOLKERT:** That is right, that would be a fair statement.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Of those three different school systems, the independent, the Catholic and the State, does any one do it better than the other, or is really just a question of lucky dip for the schools?

**Dr BULKELEY:** Local good practice is there; there are absolutely examples of local practice, but it is not about a system.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** On notice, would you be able to identify some local good practice that we could maybe recommend as a model?

**Dr BULKELEY:** Sure. I can give you one example now. In a rural school they made connection with a speech therapist who is linked in via teleconference to the school on a regular basis—it is a very remote school which had a number of students with significant communication difficulties—which then links into learning and behavioural issues. So they linked her in via teletherapy, so videoconferencing with a learning support staff member, and they get that input into the school on a regular basis.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** And the benefit of bringing, say, a speech pathologist or an occupational therapist in is so you can look beyond the behaviour, understand the cause, deal with the cause, and that is the best way of resolving the behaviour.

**Dr BULKELEY:** Absolutely.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** And when it works it really works, does it not?

**Ms VOLKERT:** Right.

**Dr BULKELEY:** Absolutely, and also because that person was linked in with the school they then could co-design what the staff needed. You start at the level the staff are at; so if they have got a lot of experience of working with kids with communication aids or particular needs for supporting communication, you start up there; if they have not, you start down there. So you individualise the response from the therapist to the school.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** And that is why being part of a school environment is essential, because you can have a great theory as an occupational therapist but if it is going to a teacher who has a very rudimentary understanding it is not going to work.

**Dr BULKELEY:** And I have to hear from the school about the context, what is going on there, so then my professional toolkit can be applied appropriately from what I am hearing from the school and what is reasonable, necessary, possible, and only specialists necessary. We are tailoring it.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Just back to where we started on the best practice on the Queensland model, you are talking about 63 to 68 occupational therapists working across the State. Just a question about the resourcing for that model. Say we were to move towards something like that in New South Wales, is that just a new set of funding that will be required across the State, or, given the situation you are describing where there are potentially multiple professionals trying to access a school, does this save funding in the system or is that funding really being provided by parents?

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Can you aggregate the individual funding or is there going to be a separate flow-on? I suppose that is the problem with integration.

**Dr BULKELEY:** There is a mix. Parents do fund, like with their own private health insurance et cetera, a lot of the times. There are limited buckets of money that are available in Better Start for helping with autism and Better Start are the Commonwealth ones that will be rolled into the NDIS. So I guess there is potentially a conversation, but there is this thing around what is the reasonable accommodation that the Department of Education should be making for students with a disability anyway, and does it fit into that?

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** The earliest evidence we got in this inquiry was that there is training available for principals under the Disability Discrimination Act, but that training is not obligatory and there are obviously principals who are not doing it. Going back to that starting point, the training should be obligatory and the knowledge should be essential, should it not?

**Dr BULKELEY:** It is not optional.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** It should not be optional.

**Dr BULKELEY:** It is just not optional; it is a culture that all students belong in our schools and have a right to education.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Before we break, I want to acknowledge for the record that John Hatton, a longstanding Independent member on the south coast, is back here again. He obviously continues to be advocating for the community and I just wanted to acknowledge on the record Mr Hatton's presence.

**The CHAIR:** I thank you both for attending today's hearing. The committee has resolved that answers to questions taken on notice be returned within 21 days. The secretariat will contact you in relation to the questions that you have taken on notice. Thank you for taking the time to come out here today.

**(The witnesses withdrew.)**

**(Luncheon adjournment)**

**EDWINA TURNER**, Principal, The Crescent School, Goulburn, sworn and examined

**KATRINA EYLAND**, Principal, Havenlee School, sworn and examined

**SARAH RUDLING**, Principal, Barrack Heights Public School, affirmed and examined

**SHERYL BRUFFEY**, Principal, Budawang School, Ulladulla, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** Ms Turner, would you like to start by making a short statement?

**Ms TURNER:** Yes. The Crescent School is a specialised educational setting located in the city of Goulburn. It is the only school of its kind in the Southern Tablelands. All students at The Crescent School are placed through the learning and wellbeing processes and are supported by a highly skilled and qualified staff that has a deep understanding of the needs of students aged four through to year 12 with intellectual disabilities, complex health care needs, mental health issues, emotional issues and/or behavioural needs. The aim of the school is to provide best practice, inclusive practice, for students with disabilities. All of our school programs are underpinned by collaboratively developed, student-centred plans and these plans are responsive to the needs of our students and their families.

Our students come from a diverse range of socio-economic backgrounds and cultures and the school is strongly supported by some of those parents, an active but very small parent and citizens association that supports the implementation of policy, planning and programs in our school. Due to our rural position, attendance is limited at networking opportunities with other school for specific purposes [SSP] staff but we have a lot of expertise and are able to build the capability of staff in other schools and through our school as well.

The major concerns for The Crescent School are those of opportunity for inclusive and non-discriminatory access to education for students with disabilities. There are many, but my main three are: Firstly, the processes involved in families accessing assisted school transport. This, among other resources, due to the nature of our location, requires extensive planning and a lengthy application process. Support is often required to assist the parents and carers to complete the application process. And then there is a wait to be informed of the outcome. Parents and carers have to prove that they cannot transport their child to school. That might involve more visits to medical people and specialists when they have already gone through that process but they have to fill in the actual medical certificate for transport. Students who are able to access regular school runs do not have to go through the same process. If they are more than a kilometre or so away from the school, then they can access regular transport. But our students cannot do that, whether it is because of behavioural or medical needs. We believe this is discriminatory. We also have difficulties having training because again of our location.

One of the other issues that we have is that the school is based on a primary school model. Because it is funded on a primary school model, the issue with that is that we believe that our senior students are discriminated against because they are actually senior students but it is funded as if they are primary students. In mainstream, head teachers receive additional time for meeting the needs of their students. We have assistant principals but assistant principals in primary schools do not receive additional time. We do not have a careers adviser, although we have to support our students and we do it with a lot of creative expertise in accessing supported work placements for the community. We do not have trained music teachers. We do not have trained PE teachers. We fund our own music therapist, which takes accessing the community, trying to find support. Music therapy is an extremely valuable resource for students in schools for specific purposes [SSPs] because sensory communication actually assists communication in other ways.

**The CHAIR:** Would anyone else like to make a statement?

**Ms EYLAND:** I would like to. I am from Havenlee School, which is an SSP in North Nowra consisting of eight classes, years preschool to year 12, seven moderate to severe classes and one multicategory class. The students present with moderate to severe intellectual disability often accompanied by secondary physical, behavioural and other disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder. Aboriginal students make up approximately 35 to 40 per cent of Havenlee School enrolments. All K-6 students follow the New South Wales syllabus and the years 7 to 12 students follow the life skills syllabus stages four to six.

Each student has a personalised learning plan from which an adjusted individualised education program is devised and implemented. There is a commitment at the school to deliver a quality education to all students in a safe and stimulating environment. The school has invested heavily in technology and is proactive in the development of interesting, engaging and challenging educational programs to include all students regardless of

their disability. I have worked as a teacher in special education for over 25 years, the last 5½ of which has been as a principal in an SSP.

What I have noticed is the slow change of enrolments of SSPs. Because of the success of the Every Student, Every School policy many students with disabilities are now being supported in either mainstream or support classes in mainstream schools who traditionally would have gone to an SSP. As a result SSP enrolments tend to be for students with higher more extreme support needs. At Havenlee School we are seeing more and more of two types of students: those with severe physical, intellectual and high medical support needs, that is typically a student in a wheelchair often requiring tube feeding, toileting, suctioning and the administration of medication; and those with severe intellectual disabilities combined with severe autism and trauma. These students often have high anxiety, high sensory needs and compulsive behaviours which in turn lead to unpredictable and often violent behaviour.

Having these two types of high support needs students in the same school is problematic. We are finding it extremely difficult to ensure all students and staff remain safe while at the same time enabling students to have access to an engaging high quality educational experiences. SSPs are not physically set up or staffed adequately for the number of students with extreme behaviours. The National Disability Insurance Scheme is being rolled out across New South Wales as we speak. Individuals in this scheme are assessed on what they can do and what resources are required—whether human, physical or time—to promote quality of life and positive engagement in the community.

In SSPs we aim to do this too. However, it is often impossible for us to facilitate success in their goals as we are not resourced for this model. Parents want the best for their children. We as staff members for SSPs want the best from our students. I believe as a system we often let them down. In conclusion I am proud to be a principal of an SSP in the Department of Education. I believe in the ideals of the Department of Education and hope through this inquiry and a team approach there will be changes which enable us to meet the students' needs.

**Ms RUDLING:** My esteemed colleagues are all from SSPs and I am the mainstream primary school principal. The proud and respectful principal of a local Shellharbour school. May I begin today by acknowledging the Five Islands people on whose land this meeting takes place. I acknowledge the support and guidance of the elders in the community with whom I work, as they contribute to the story that I would like to tell today. My name is Sarah Rudling and I am the leader of an extraordinary school that is committed to educational excellence for all. It is my absolute privilege to be invited to speak to you today and tell you the story of my school, Barrack Heights Public School.

I work in a school that delivers innovative, locally significant, culturally appropriate high quality educational programs that engage all students in their journey of individual, personal growth and learning. A school that is extraordinary relies on the collective brilliance of the staff, parents, community and local organisations who work together to create a centre of excellence for the extraordinary students who attend it. Our teachers and support staff care about educating the whole child and students are encouraged to participate to the best of their individual ability.

During 2016, 196 of our 241 students were identified and included in the national consistent collection of data for students with a disability. That is 81 per cent of our school population. Much higher than many of the statistics I have heard quoted about the level of students requiring support for disability and/or additional need in schools. Every one of those students has an individualised learning plan that has been created in collaboration with parents, carers, and where appropriate, external agencies as we have a high proportion of students in out-of-home care in my school.

To ensure that attitudes, accountability and culture are understood we currently nurture and support 251 children. We have nine mainstream classes and three support classes, two multicategory and one autism. An extraordinary school recognises that their supreme responsibility is to grow every individual child into a successful learner, a confident and creative individual and an active and informed citizen who has the self-esteem and motivation to thrive in the modern world. How are we doing this? Passion, dedication, commitment, good will, hard work, but above all else advocacy. Many of the students who attend our school are disadvantaged by generational trauma, poverty and disability.

It is our commitment to our community to bring reality to the rhetoric of breaking cycles. To do this we strategically use funding and resources to address point of need in our school. This has included restructuring classes, employing additional teaching and nonteaching staff and paraprofessionals to educate and support us to work with students and their families. It requires a huge amount of creativity and there is often frustration that

we cannot do more. The unmet need in my school is incredible and growing at an exponential rate. A bipartisan agreement on education at all levels of politics and across all parties of funding schools to a minimum resource standard would see all schools in Australia described as exceptional.

Finally, I would like to share an email I received last week from a parent whose children attend my school. I hope this conveys the continued complexity and frustration that we face as both educators and parents working together in the delivery of quality and inclusive education of students with a disability or additional need in my school. I acknowledge Rosie, who is in the audience today. The email reads:

Dear Sarah,

Thanks for sending me the submission made by our school re meeting the needs of students with a disability.

Thank you for including me and asking for the involvement of parents and families. I have nothing but the highest respect for your lion-hearted drive and determination to do the best for each of our children. Unfortunately, I don't really understand how you would have me help. I feel that I may not have understood your requests correctly. The language I've encountered in my brief research has been both dense and foreign... I have information overload, and at the same time I feel both terribly ignorant and ill-equipped.

I have so little brain power available after the crushing emotional and physical demands of my daily life in a household where disability dictates everything in one respect or another, and even less courage in terms of approaching people I don't know well, with questions or requests I myself don't fully comprehend. This is pretty much how it feels to be the parent of a child with a disability in a nutshell!

I fear that I am not the person you need on side right now. This is my failing and I hate it with a passion. I would do anything and everything within my power to make a positive difference for you. For all the kids. For my dear Thomas. But I am just so very limited. I am grateful to God for all the work you and your devoted team do in providing the best education and care for my kids. I am really happy with the school. It is not in my nature to complain, let alone agitate for change. I am no visionary, I can't imagine what to ask for, I just make the best of what I see before me. Sometimes I fail at that fail at that, too. I suppose as a parent I rely very heavily on your team at Barrack Heights Public School to provide an education for Thomas. We recently found out that he probably has dyslexia (on top of the autism) and I am so fearful that he may not learn to be a confident reader and that this will hold him back in life. Kids with autism often seem to have huge potential in certain areas... some may well be the innovative geniuses of tomorrow... but my Thomas needs to learn to read and write, first. It kills me to think that lack of funding is a determining factor here!

**Ms BRUFFEY:** Thank you to my colleagues. It is very interesting and rewarding to listen to what people have to say. I am the principal at Budawang school, which is the only school for specific purposes between Ulladulla and the Victorian border. It is a K-12 school with five classes, supporting 35 students with intellectual disability. Eighteen of our students have a severe intellectual disability and 14 students have a moderate intellectual disability. Of those with a moderate intellectual disability, 11 also have autism. Many of our students also have complex health needs, physical disability or sensory impairment. Thirteen students are high school aged and 22 students are primary school aged.

We service a radius of 55 kilometres, so assisted school travel is a significant resource, with access to our school being dependant on access to transport services. We have a team of six teachers, six school learning support officers, a senior admin manager, a school counsellor for half a day per week, and me, the principal. Six of our seven teachers, including me, have a masters degree in special education. In addition, we enjoy the services of the itinerant support teacher—vision and hearing. These people provide expert support for four of our students. We also employ a music therapist, a speech therapist, a psychologist and an occupational therapist, each for one day per week. We employ a nutritionalist who acts as a consultant on an as-needs basis. Those people provide important just in time and ongoing professional development to our staff. They provide information and advocacy support to our parents and carers, and they help to align service provision that has been somewhat disjointed and intermittent in the past.

We have a very active parents and citizens association. They have a strong input into the school plan and some of our best ideas come from our parents. For example, they suggested we use volunteers to support student learning, and we now have a team of 28 volunteers who contribute more than 300 hours of support each week. Developing a package to support and train those volunteers was our Every Student, Every school project, and that can be found on our school web page. Our school operates as a member of the Milton-Ulladulla community of schools. We work with you Ulladulla public, Milton public and Ulladulla High School to ensure that our students are not working in isolation from their peers. Our students attend integration classes at each of these schools for two hours a week, and each school joins us for integration classes, cultural events, work experience and traineeships.

Our curriculum delivery is unique, because each of our classes spends one-third of each day in a community setting. We can do this because we own two small buses and we have great support from our local community. Personalised learning plans determine how each student spends their day. Every parent has an expectation that their child will receive individual attention and with our team of teachers, learning support

officers, itinerant support teachers, therapists and volunteers, we can almost always ensure that this happens. Of course, the teachers need to be skilled in coordinating all of these adults, but generally, we are a happy, well-balanced lot. We sometimes fall below expectations, but there is a genuine determination amongst our staff to provide each and every one of our students with a happy, caring and vibrant learning experience, where students are engaged in activities that are relevant and meaningful to them. In addition, we work hard to ensure that parents and carers feel comfortable to let us know when we are not on track and, so far, we have always been able to find solutions or improve delivery to satisfy expectations.

We take our role as a centre of expertise seriously. We are dedicated to improving the flow of information, skills, and resources between special educators on the South Coast. This has been the focus of our second Every Student, Every School project, and we have developed a register with contact details of special educators from Nowra to the Victorian border. We have developed a chain of local hubs so that people can meet face to face once a term, and we have run two special education conferences catering to more than 200 special education teachers, executive and school learning support officers in 2016 and 2017. This conference has provided a backboard for other SSPs to share their Every Student, Every School projects and the evaluation from these conferences has been extremely positive. Thank you very much for inviting me here to participate in this inquiry. I am hoping we can all work together to improve educational outcomes for our students and their families.

**The CHAIR:** Your opening statement mentions schools from where you are to the Victorian border. Are you getting other services from Ulladulla to the Victorian border?

**Ms BRUFFEY:** We are the only SSP. All of the other schools need to cater for the students within a mainstream structure.

**The CHAIR:** You are the only special one, so the others went into mainstream?

**Ms BRUFFEY:** Yes, that is right.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** What is the furthest that your students travel?

**Ms BRUFFEY:** The furthest our students travel is about 55 kilometres, but we have lots of families who move specifically to our town because there is not an opportunity for a school close to them to provide the same support services that we provide.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Ms Turner, Ms Eyland and Ms Bruffey, in terms of the funding model, even though you have children from kindy through to high school, you are funded only on a primary school funding model?

**Ms BRUFFEY:** That is right.

**Ms EYLAND:** That is right.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** You indicated some things that are not provided in that, head teachers, physical education teachers—

**Ms TURNER:** Music teachers.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Music teachers, but particularly I note there was a discussion about the removal of funding for the School to Work funding.

**Ms TURNER:** Yes, you are allowed to apply for a certain amount of School to Work funding. Because we are limited in which programs we can provide for our students, this year we were not able to apply because we are running the same program. It is only a small amount of funding and our students are going out into the community, because that is what is needed for them so that they have a life after school, so we have to act with local organisations, other schools send their students out, but we do not have that teacher to be able to organise that, so we do not have that provision.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I would imagine that children who do not have special needs, the transition is normally easier and they have got the funding for it. Ms Eyland, how does it work?

**Ms EYLAND:** At our school, the teacher of the senior class is responsible for organising the work experience and transition for the senior students, and there is an itinerant transition teacher that is based in Warilla, and they often send us correspondence about different activities that are going on, but often they are in Wollongong, so our students do not really have the transport to enable them to access those sorts of activities, so it is quite limited to the Nowra area. We do the best we can.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I assume it is time intensive, because you have a child with special needs transitioning into young adulthood. Whoever you are placing the student with needs to understand what the child's capacities are. I imagine that is very time-intensive.

**Ms EYLAND:** It is very time-intensive. We also employ an SLSO and aide to go with them on any transition plan because, as you were saying, each student is individual, and they often require support to access the new surrounding and we are not funded for that either.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** From the outsider's perspective, and we have heard this submission a number of times now, rather than less funding, it seems to me that your schools with the K-12 require more funding? What are your thoughts, Ms Bruffey?

**Ms BRUFFEY:** We follow a similar model to what has already been discussed. We have received funding this year because we have tried to make sure that we put forward a new program each year and that improves your chances of obtaining funding. This year we are lucky as we have twins. They want to attend the same workplace together so we can support the two of them together. But we do that in a variety of creative ways and we work in with the community because the community will often help us in what we are trying to achieve with our students.

**Ms EYLAND:** Every school can apply for what is called link funding. We were allocated a certain amount of money—I do not want to say the exact amount of money off the top of my head because I do not exactly remember. It is about \$2,000 for the year in link funding. That is meant to help us link with the post school options.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** But that is nothing compared with an actual full-time careers teacher.

**Ms TURNER:** The crux of the matter is that we do have to support the students when they go out into the workplaces. We do have some high functioning students but they are not going to know how to be in a business setting. We do have great organisations like the Coles Distribution Centre and they will take a number of our students so our teacher and SLSO go out there. But having to supply a SLSO from our staff means that we are short staffed at school.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** What you just said about careers and transitions applies equally to PE, music and head teachers in charge of curriculum. You have to take resources from the classroom and from the ordinary classwork to do the basics. Is that right?

**Ms EYLAND:** Yes.

**Ms TURNER:** It is like looking at our students and saying that they are intellectually disabled. We all agree with that but they may have talents in art or music and they really require food technology. We use the step in the Alexander kitchen garden program to do that. It is not provided; it is creative about how we manage it. We can access the high schools when we set up the programs between high schools and us, but it is just not provided for.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Each of you has described how you are dealing with that and how you are managing through the system. The department has made a commitment that students will be treated equally under the legislation that governs them. It is hard to imagine how they can meet that test when your schools, in at least three of these examples, are funded on a primary school model that provides fewer resources. That question has been raised and the Committee needs to put it to the department when we see it again at the end of the process. There seems to be an in-principle major problem for the department separate from what you are dealing with day to day.

**Ms EYLAND:** I would agree.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** You are downstream from that decision and having to deal with it.

**Ms EYLAND:** That is right. We have to be creative, just like Ms Rudling said in her speech.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Ms Rudling, your school has 81 per cent of its students identified as having special needs but it is not a special needs school.

**Ms RUDLING:** No.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** What does that mean you are missing out on?

**Ms RUDLING:** I was thinking about this today. I have spent my entire career working in schools of social disadvantage. To me there is a clear distinction between disadvantage, poverty and disability. In my

current context we have the triple threat. My creativity around meeting the needs of that volume of children is without a huge amount of funding that we are waiting for—the disability loadings. So 100 per cent of my funds that should be addressing disadvantage—it is very different to disability—is used in allowing my children to access education at their individual point of need. I am fortunate that I have the triple threat because I receive a substantial amount of money. But there is such an unmet need within my school that although we have done some amazing things—some very creative and innovative things—a lot more can be done in that area.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Because of the social and economic disadvantage and just the sheer exhaustion from parents who are looking after kids with special needs, you say that often the parents are not in a capacity to organise the medical appointments and fill in the forms to access the funding that is needed. Is that right?

**Ms RUDLING:** That is 100 per cent correct. Generational poverty, disadvantage and disability are very high in my school. To be working effectively with parents we need to take time to build relationships. Then when the relationships are built we have to work effectively with them to be able to help them to get all of the paperwork and all of the requirements necessary for us to then put forward a case that this particular child needs additional funds. But that takes a long time. My funding for low-level adjustment for disability last year was around \$152,000, of which \$122,000 was for a staffing position for a learning and support teacher 1.2. So I have a full time teacher and another teacher one day a week as well. I have to give full credit to my learning and support teacher and subsequent teachers that I employ. The goodwill that they add, \$122,000 does not do them justice. My learning and support teacher is incredibly dedicated to the community but at the cost of them being able to support children in the classroom, which primarily is her role.

The \$30,000 that is left over is for me to meet the needs of students with a low-level disability, and many of my 81 per cent would fit into that category. I did some maths last night. If I were just to provide a school learning support officer [SLSO] for that money my kids would get 3½ hours of support per year with an SLSO. That is not what they need. They need a highly educated and skilled professional to be working with them to close the gap for all children. That is something I am extraordinarily passionate about. What are we doing? At the end of the day these kids will leave school and be members of our society. What kinds of members of society do we want them to be? That is what drives my school.

**Ms BRUFFEY:** I agree with the point made by Ms Rudling. Our money tends not to be well invested if we are hiring somebody like an SLSO, particularly if they are not well trained, that is why we go down the path of hiring speech therapists, occupational therapists and psychologists. But it is very expensive. But the knowledge, skill and new energy that those people bring into our school is very important for us. They provide lots of different flow-on effects, if you like. But if money is tight that is a very difficult decision. We have had to sacrifice other things so that we can afford to employ those people.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** In Victoria the department employs speech pathologists directly and provides them to schools. In Queensland they employ occupational therapists directly through the department and provide them to schools. Would those sorts of models be a great relief?

**Ms EYLAND:** Totally.

**Ms TURNER:** Because we do not get that low level of funding for disability in the SSP, we do not get a learning and support teacher. We are well-resourced in that we have small classes and we have a teacher and an SLSO in every class. I am just passionate about doing the best for our students with disabilities with the department to make things better. I understand that we are well-resourced but to employ a teacher for a whole year is beyond our reach. We certainly could not do that. Our flexible funding is about \$74,000 additional funding for the year but some things have been taken away. For example, a computer coordinator is no longer in the system. We are heavily into technology. We have iPads and we have BIGmacks—they are not the food Big Macs, they are communication devices. We have SMART Boards and everything else but we need to have somebody who is capable of looking after those things, so we have to provide that through our flexible grant funding. If we want to have a learning support teacher we have to work that out. We cannot have an actual teacher so we have to work out how we can get teachers off class to do those sorts of things. It is all these sorts of inequitable things in our system. It is systemic.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Turner, you mentioned that there was an opportunity to apply for School to Work funding.

**Ms TURNER:** You can apply if you do not run the same program. Last year we had a certain program in place. It is not a huge amount of money and we are running the same program this year, which is good because it is consistent for our students, and we cannot reapply on that basis. It is a small amount of funding that



is provided for those sorts of things and we creatively provide other ways of supporting our students. For example, we run our own trading group and we run our own car wash and do things like that. That also requires employing staff to assist with that while the teachers are working with the others students as well. It is just a matter of working around these things and finding ways for our students to learn the skills that they are going to need, because they need those lifelong skills.

**The CHAIR:** But are you still getting the funding?

**Ms TURNER:** Not this year. We are not getting that.

**Ms EYLAND:** We did not get it this year either. Once again, we were doing the same program as last year because we wanted continuity with our students with the program and we did not get any of the School to Work funding because of it.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** If it works for you in one year and it is successful you are disqualified from getting it the next year?

**Ms EYLAND:** If you continue the same program of School to Work from year to year you do not apply for more funding because I think it is meant to be that the program is meant to be completed in one year. That is the aim. But sometimes in our school our students often take a long time to learn things. Sometimes if we hit on something that is successful we want to keep it going and not try to change to things. We want to continue what we are doing.

**The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES:** One of the terms of reference is in relation to the complaints process from a parental point of view and the teachers' perspective. Do any of you have any comments on that? Does it work, are there areas that need to be improved and is it easy for parents to navigate? You are all smiling.

**Ms BRUFFEY:** I do not know if it was easy for our parents to navigate because it is quite a new document.

**Ms EYLAND:** It is very new.

**Ms BRUFFEY:** But I really like that document. I think we can work really well with that as a school. Our school is smaller than the other schools represented here and so obviously it is easier to get to know everybody on quite an intimate level, if you like. We tend not to have to go down a very formalised pathway very often because things will often happen in a more natural sort of way. However, reading through that, if I was in difficult times or if one of my family members was struggling to make a complaint, I think that is a really good document. I am not sure how other people feel about it.

**Ms EYLAND:** I have read the document and in-serviced our staff on the new document. It is not hugely different in the staff side of things from the old document from what I can work out, but the parent section is quite good. But I do not know how well we communicate that to parents. I do not know how well the parents know that system.

**Ms TURNER:** I think that is the issue, that there is still a lot of support required. There are so many difficulties and our parents of students with disabilities are heavily overloaded and sometimes overwhelmed. When you are in that sort of state it is difficult to manoeuvre your way around anything. We are like Ms Bruffey and I think it would be the same across the board: We build up good relationships with our parents and we work through things at a local level and hopefully we can sort most things. Sometimes it needs to go further and parents need to be aware of how that is happening.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** But you are all saying the same thing in one form or another. You have to pull core education staff off the front line in order to work with parents to get basic forms filled out and applications done.

**Ms EYLAND:** I would say that a very high percentage of my parents have very low literacy skills. The enrolment forms, for example, are beyond the literacy skills of many parents in my school. My administration staff spend quite a considerable amount of time sitting with the parents, filling out the enrolment forms and assisted school travel forms. Any form that we send home we offer to help the parents fill out. I know the parents that need the help so we target those parents.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** And there is no separate funding for that anywhere?

**Ms EYLAND:** No.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** But it is a day in, day out drain on resources?

**Ms EYLAND:** Yes.

**Ms RUDLING:** We can only comment on our school settings, and we are happy to. I find that this is a huge area in my school and a use of personnel who you really want to be at the coalface, but we need to be working with parents to help them with my children. For example, I have a school counsellor just two days a week. It is very hard to engage my school counsellor in therapeutic work with students, which I have a high need for because I have a very grave proportion of children with mental health issues and they need therapeutic intervention from the school counsellor. When you are adding in the amount of time and effort it takes for a school counsellor to sit with parents and help them work through forms and things like that, it is an administrative task but it does require the expertise of a school counsellor to go through particular forms.

I heard earlier about access requests and all of the kinds of things done to assist parents to understand that process. I agree my administration team are fabulous at assisting the rest of us to help and sit with parents but, again, you need to build the trust first, because it is very confrontational for many parents to come in and ask for that help because they do not want to share their literacy levels. I would continually refer to the good will of educators in schools currently. There is an incredible amount of good will and an incredible amount of stress meeting the demands of what society asks of us. I am hoping that this inquiry can shed some light on the complexity of schools as far as that goes.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I was hoping you might individually, or collectively if there is a capacity for that, think about what a good response would be. If there was an in-school resource what would the nature of it be to do what we know needs to be done, which is work with parents, bring in their confidence and take that burden off your teaching staff? You can have a go now or you can do it on notice.

**Ms RUDLING:** Full Gonski funding.

**Ms TURNER:** I could say that we were very fortunate this year. We actually applied for and got a school chaplain, which is like a welfare person who is not religiously based. That was a Government initiative. Last year and this year and next year we have that school chaplain. That is not a huge amount, it is \$20,000 a year, but the NDIS has had an impact on schools. As far as supporting our parents, they have had difficulty. One or two of our parents have actually tried the self-managed side of things. Most of our parents are going through agencies but having to work out exactly what their children need has been very difficult. We have used our school chaplain to do that. Some position like that I think has been really valuable considering that we do not have a learning support teacher or somebody like that who would actually work with the children more. Some position that assists with all of that sort of thing would be wonderful, I would submit.

**Ms RUDLING:** Agreed. Any hands in schools are welcomed with open arms.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Can I just ask about a different area altogether? Each of you is in the part of the school system that really knows what the issues are here and also knows the potential of your students. I wanted to ask you about training though and how the training works across the board in New South Wales. Does it measure up? What can we do to lift the standards in some of the schools that do not have the sort of exposure your school—

**Ms EYLAND:** Is this teacher training?

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Teacher training.

**Ms EYLAND:** Professional learning in general in the schools or pre-teacher training?

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** In schools. Forget the pre-teacher training for now—obviously that is important, but I am just interested in your views on where this is up to and what we can do better.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** And it may include curriculum training in the teaching course.

**Ms EYLAND:** I would like to start by saying that the new professional development plan [PDP] process that has been introduced I think is fantastic.

**Ms BRUFFEY:** I do too.

**Ms EYLAND:** And therefore there is a really good, strong focus on professional learning, and I think that is very needed and I think that is great. However, I would really like to see a little bit more support in being able to implement that, especially in SSPs, as we have just been given the PDPs for non-teaching staff as well as teaching staff. For instance, the professional learning budget for this year given to me is \$16,447 for Havenlee

School. I have 30 staff. So that works out at \$548.23 for every staff member for professional learning for the year. I really applaud the department for valuing professional learning and putting a process in place for it to become formalised, but for us to be able to implement it properly I feel that we are letting our staff down.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Is that a kind of across-the-board sense? It is a good step forward but there is inadequate funding?

**Ms TURNER:** I have a similar circumstance because we have SLSOs in every classroom and other non-teaching staff, and we were given \$18,000. I worked it out and we have 25.276 staff to use those funds. In SSPs the whole staff needs to be trained in manual handling, the whole staff needs to be trained in NCI, for example, because we have an MC class, the mandatory training for things like CPR, you have to pay for all of that as well. So it does not go very far, and with the PDPs there is no time with that to have the non-teaching staff on that. We are just going to try and creatively take the money out of our budget, which also pays for the Riding for the Disabled Association program and Music Therapy and Stephanie Alexander.

**Ms RUDLING:** I think I agree with my colleagues here that the PDP process has streamlined professional learning and really targeted individual learning for each teacher, which is fabulous. The difficulty in managing individual need is that many teachers in my school are teaching different cohorts of children. Therefore, in any particular year they might want to access professional learning. It does become a funding issue because to take off a class for the day is \$450 to replace them with a casual teacher, and that has fairly well expended your budget there, but that is not paying for the professional learning costs or, if it is a two-day course, the accommodation if they were to drive up to Sydney. It is quite a challenge to meet that.

Every single teacher in my school is constantly trying to upskill themselves, and that notion of lifelong learners you will find across the entire State. As far as teachers are concerned, it is not that they do not want to be professionally developed—again, good will comes into it a lot—but after a really complex and difficult day at school, because it is cheap you are required to stay back and do some training after hours, and that might go to 6 o'clock at night, just so that you can train your whole staff for a similar amount of money.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** On budget.

**Ms RUDLING:** Correct. And I think it is not professional, it is not really holding our teachers in high esteem. The other comment that I would like to make is about the volume of professional learning that seems to come through as e-learning—online learning. We are humans—we need to talk and communicate and gauge each other's needs. To go and sit in front of a computer screen and to do some learning, in my mind does not qualify you to be then anywhere near the level of expert that you need to be on autism or dyslexia or all of those things. So, again, it is up to individual schools to manage that and to bring people together and to do that kind of training. So you will not see that statistically X amount of schoolteachers have engaged in training in autism and things like that, because innovative schools will be doing that as best practice, and e-learning is not best practice by any stretch of the imagination.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** The phrases used in the submission here are "inadequate" and "inappropriate", "offering the same training for all, regardless of individual teachers' skills and expertise", and "teachers perceive the online training as a taster, lacking in depth of knowledge".

**Ms RUDLING:** Correct.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Is that too harsh?

**Ms TURNER:** No, because we are not speech therapists. We are trained as educators and we are able to enable our students to access education, and we do a great job at that. But we do not have that expertise, and to employ speech therapists and OTs, and we employ a Music Therapist, you come into a business, which is I think how education came into a business model. But even that is another strength. The Learning Business Management Reform, that is another reform that we were looking at. All of this adds to strength and staff saying—for example, with the PDP process for the non-teaching staff—"What time are you giving us to do that?" and "How are we going to manage this?" Their wages are not huge, so they are not looking to stay outside of school hours, and then we have to say, "If we do that, we should be paying them overtime or it should be time in lieu". All of this comes into it. So it is very difficult.

**Ms EYLAND:** Can I quickly add that we have just looked down the track. The whole point of professional learning is to improve student outcomes, and I think that is what we have to keep in mind, and that we always want the student outcomes to be the priority, but, unfortunately, sometimes it gets lost in the system.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for attending today's hearing. I certainly appreciate your dedication to the system and the hard work that you all put in. If you have taken any questions on notice, could the answers be returned within 21 days? The secretariat will contact you in relation to questions you have taken on notice.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I will probably have some questions on notice about the departmental oversight of resource allocation funding, but I will put them on notice with the secretariat.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much again.

**(The witnesses withdrew)**

**CAROLYNNE MERCHANT**, Director, Public Schools NSW, Southern Tablelands Network, NSW Department of Education, sworn and examined

**MANDY SHAW**, Director, Public Schools NSW, Wollongong Network, NSW Department of Education, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** Would you like to start by making a short statement?

**Ms SHAW:** Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about support for students with special needs. I am a strong supporter of public education as an inclusive service for all students. The vision of our Secretary, Mark Scott, of the need to bring about improvement at all levels for students, teachers and schools is vital. I am proud of the commitment of the department to provide high-quality teaching and learning for all students.

The need for ongoing improvement in the quality of educational experiences is the key focus of my role and that of the principals that I work with. The challenge of provision of high-quality learning experiences for every student with special needs is a core aspect of this. I have been the principal of several primary schools. One of these schools had a support unit of four classes: a mild intellectual disability [IM] class, a moderate intellectual disability [IO] class and two autism classes. During my principalship, the two autism classes were added to the school, following consultation with the staff and the community. These classes were integral to our school and added value to our achievements and strengths as a whole school.

In 2012 I relieved as School Education Director for Campbelltown, Director of Public Schools NSW, when the Every School, Every Student policy was being introduced in schools. For several years I returned to my substantive school and supported the implementation of this. I strongly believe in the merits of this policy to provide schools and teachers with high expectations for the learning of students with special needs and to bring about improvement in appropriate support for students to achieve. This includes professional learning to enhance teacher expertise, to enhance processes for learning and support in schools and specialist teachers in every school.

I have been the Director of Public Schools NSW for the Wollongong network since the beginning of 2016. I oversee 37 schools and principals. This includes nine secondary schools, two schools for special purposes [SSPs] and 24 primary schools. There are 18 schools in my network that have support classes, 20 including my SSPs. There are 66 support classes in schools and in addition our two SSPs have 31 classes.

**Ms MERCHANT:** Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today in relation to support for students with special needs. My professional history includes experience working with students who need additional support and their families in a range of contexts. As a classroom teacher, I worked with students with low-level learning needs, with hearing and vision disability and with autism, as an assistant principal in a school with support classes and students integrated into the mainstream. As a teaching principal, I have worked in small schools with just two classes, with students with learning needs including impaired hearing. As a principal of a school with one initial support class that grew to three classes, two multi-categorical [MC] classes and an IM class, including students that were integrated into the mainstream.

I hosted and worked with itinerant teachers, both hearing and visioned, within that school. I am very proud of my leadership and the achievements gained by this school, especially in the very inclusive culture that we developed. I left there four years ago but in the last three years the students that we had in our support classes for the last three years—one of those children has been chosen as school captain, voted by the students and supported by the staff. So it is very much an inclusive school, with an excellent culture for all students and often parents are asking us to enrol their children out of zone.

As a Director of Public Schools, Southern Tablelands network, I endeavour to build that same capacity on principles of interpersonal skills, knowledge of individual learning and teaching outcomes for students based on their needs. I look after or work with principals from 37 schools, five high schools, one school for SSP, a central school, 18 smaller schools and 12 larger primary schools. I am passionately committed to the education of all students and to the public education's commitment to inclusive education on the same basis for all students. I work to support principals and teachers as they work in a mindset of continuous improvement for increased outcomes for all students, including those for students with additional learning needs and as they support families in what can be very complex and challenging circumstances, meeting the individual needs for each student and their family. I thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** First of all, I thank you both for coming and I think I have seen you here throughout the day listening to the evidence, is that right?

**Ms SHAW:** Yes.

**Ms MERCHANT:** Yes.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I might start on the oversight of the funding that is allocated under Every Student, Every School [ESES]. You have probably heard—you have seen evidence if you have read the submissions—of concern from parents where their child has special needs, the resource allocation model provides funding to the school predicated on the special needs of the student population, but then there is a discretion in the principal about how that funding is spent. You are aware of that overarching concern?

**Ms SHAW:** Yes.

**Ms MERCHANT:** Yes.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** How do you audit the ESES funding to ensure that the money that has been allocated to special needs children is actually spent on them? How do you do it?

**Ms MERCHANT:** In the first instance, the funding that is given to schools is no longer tied to, "This has to be spent in this particular area or that particular area".

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** We are very aware of that and that is what underpins the concern.

**Ms MERCHANT:** That tied our hands as a principal, very much so, in that we could not spend specific buckets of money for specific students. The way that the funding is now in the four equity buckets of money or four equity areas: Aboriginal, low socio-economic status [SES], low support needs, and English as a second language. So a student in a school can tap into all those buckets of money. I do not have to say, "This little bit for this person", I can use it flexibly as a principal. It does not have to be tied to a specific program. It is the flexibility that allows us to support the needs of a range of students.

I have those conversations with my principals as I meet with them. So I meet with each of my principals on a regular basis and we talk about the funding and the needs of the students. Their finances come through in their annual financial statement at the end of the year. We have discussions as part of our one-on-one meetings with what outcomes are they meeting? What are they using their funding for? How are they meeting the needs of students? Part of it may be we have a discussion around what challenges are their schools facing? It may be then they will talk about specific students and we talk about what they have got in place around those students and what funding is there.

It is very much a trust and verification, so I do not audit their funding. We have discussed things that are in place, so they might engage a school learning support officer [SLSO]—if that is what they have chosen and worked out with the parents is what is needed—and that would then take through a cost, it may be a range of those buckets of money.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** So the long and short of it from yourself is that you discuss it with the principals who are making those decisions?

**Ms MERCHANT:** Yes.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** What about you, Ms Shaw?

**Ms SHAW:** I guess I would iterate some of the things that Ms Merchant has said. I think that school funding is flexible and it is about getting improvement across the school. A child could have funding in all of those different areas that Ms Merchant mentioned.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** And may get no money?

**Ms SHAW:** No. Just hear me out. They could get funding in all of those different areas. So we would not silo that funding and say that is only this compartment for you and this compartment for you. It is funding that needs to be used to make a difference, to have impact. In a classroom a teacher needs to cater for all the students in their class well. Every Student, Every School, underpinned by the negotiation that the teacher in the classroom is working to try to, through high expectations, meet the learning needs of those students who need it, these students with special needs, through adjustments but also through being an expert in what they do. The funding is around looking at local context, the individuals in your school and developing programs and support for teachers so teachers can deliver on that. The literacy and the numeracy level of those students can be maximised.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** It is a simple question I am asking: How do you audit and test the outcomes? It sounds to me like it is ad hoc discussions and gut feeling.

**Ms SHAW:** No, I do not think it is.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Explain to me how it is not ad hoc decisions and gut feeling, I am not understanding?

**Ms SHAW:** Okay. In a conversation with a principal over—we have them several times a year, certainly I do—for several hours. It is looking at what is the funding, what is the school plan and why are you doing that? Why have you got these projects in place? What does the project mean? What are you trying to achieve from this? What have you done so far? What is the impact of what you are doing? Where is the evidence that shows that? It is going from the big picture but also to the granular because it is about looking at students sitting in there who have individual education plans. What does that look like within that? What are we trying to achieve there? It is going from the bigger picture of the school to looking at individuals as well, not every individual but certainly looking at some of those.

**Ms MERCHANT:** The money that is given is not tied to specific students, it is on a needs basis.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** That is a rather complicated answer: It is not tied to students, it is on a needs basis?

**Ms MERCHANT:** Not tied to individual students, it is calculated on a needs basis.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Correct. There are repeated examples, not one, two, 10 or 20 but many more examples where parents of children with special needs, not so much in special needs schools, but in the broader mainstream schools where they say, "I thought my child was going to get three hours of assistance per day. That is what we thought there was a funding level that was going to do that and it was entirely withdrawn and given to an unrelated service". Or, "We had school learning support officers [SLSO] and they are doing lawn maintenance or covering books in the library and being taken away from their work with special needs students". How do you test that is not happening? Or, is it happening and how do you rectify it?

**Ms MERCHANT:** The conversation we would have around how they spend the money in those classrooms, an SLSO is not necessarily the best choice for students.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** It is not the best choice for lawn maintenance either.

**Ms MERCHANT:** No, the funding does not necessarily—sometimes it is what people actually see. For parents it is what they see is happening, they may not see the other stuff underneath. That person who is doing lawn maintenance may not be from those equity loadings, that might be from the resource allocation model [RAM] money. That is totally different. It may be that we employ teachers or SLSOs and there is a requirement for minimum hours. It may be that we have a shortage and we fund that person out of our RAM to do something else to make up their particular hours. The complexities around employing somebody can be from a range of sources of our money, it does not have to be—

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** It is not.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Presumably some schools are doing this better than others?

**Ms MERCHANT:** Absolutely.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** You are looking across quite big regions, you are seeing how schools are dealing with this, how much of a variation is there? We have had evidence that parents do have concerns, there are differences. Are you looking at these schools within that variation of schools doing well and the schools that are not?

**Ms MERCHANT:** Absolutely.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** How much variation is there?

**Ms MERCHANT:** There is a lot and it depends on the experience of a principal. You can have the students who come into a school with needs where a principal has not had to adapt processes to meet these students' needs. There is a whole learning process. We are looking at some of our smaller schools where they have to do all the learning that goes with a larger school with less staff. You will have less experience. Some needs are very complex and there will be the learning that goes around them. I can have a principal working excellently in one school, shift to another and there are a whole lot of new challenges that they have to come across.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** If you are not auditing that, how do you deal with that situation?

**Ms SHAW:** We are, perhaps in a different way. This is a highly complex area and looking at success—

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Highly complex and highly opaque.

**Ms SHAW:** Yes, definitely it is. In terms of looking at effectiveness of the sorts of programs and support that teachers use the funding to implement in their schools does vary. When things are not working as well as what they should be that could be based on a number of signals that we get around that. It could be around parents and community. It could be around what appears to be happening in the school. There are balances that we put in place.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** How do the parents find out about this? As you are working through the system where do they get the feedback? They do not seem to be getting it at the moment about where the funding is spent and how it is being managed.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** You cannot find it in the school reports or in the annual reports. It is not there, so how do they find out?

**Ms MERCHANT:** A principal who is operating really good processes within their school—this is what we would encourage them to do—has set up a learning and support team within the school. These teachers and the learning and support team would be identifying students needs, looking at what it is those particular students need and where that funding might be spent. They should work with parents. They should be part of those initial meetings and it should be a conversation around their input: What do you feel your child needs to meet their circumstances?

**Ms SHAW:** Could I just say that whole consultation with parents is right from the beginning of the year about where is their child going, what is the plan and what do you think about that? It is not done as well as it should be. I would be the first person to say that could be done a lot better. In some places it is done very well and there are good relationships built. There is trust built and clear communication about the sort of support in place for that plan for that child. In some places it is not done as well as it should be.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** But if that is your comfort, there is no way you can go down to a granular level and work out if that is happening in a school, not with two conversations a year with the principals a year regarding Every Student, Every School. You cannot do it.

**Ms MERCHANT:** There are other mechanisms. I have one school who has done a self audit or had a company come in and evaluate what they do. They have 50 or 60 recommendations that have come out of that.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** If you do that in every school there is all your RAM funding gone on a consultant.

**Ms MERCHANT:** That is a school that has chosen to do that. Our office will work with the school and the learning and support team, which is a no-cost thing. They will work and do the same thing. They will do an evaluation within the school and make recommendations for that school to actually work through.

**The CHAIR:** You do not know what that cost was of the consultancy?

**Ms MERCHANT:** The educational services team we have within our office, they have a couple of different evaluations they can do. There is an attendance one, learning support team one and they can work within schools to have a look at what they have in place.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** The Chair's question was about the school consultancy.

**Ms SHAW:** The external one?

**Ms MERCHANT:** The external one. They have chosen to have that.

**The CHAIR:** I understand they have chosen it, but are you aware what it cost?

**Ms MERCHANT:** No, I do not. It was a high school. It was a principal who is reasonably new to the school. Each year he picks an area, as part of the school planning, school excellence framework, how they put things together he will have a look at what needs to be done and do the evaluation and gather the evidence around it. He has chosen to do that around support classes.

**The CHAIR:** Rather than go through a department audit?



**Ms MERCHANT:** No, he has done that one as an external.

**The CHAIR:** As well? He has done two?

**Ms MERCHANT:** He could choose to do the one through Educational Services if he wished to. At times I have recommended that a school might like to do that and that is something else they have done. They do not have to do that; that is a choice.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Instead of having additional special education resources there was a local decision made to spend heaven knows how many thousands of dollars on an external consultant when there was a free resource available in the department. How do you pick that up in your audits?

**Ms MERCHANT:** That is how they use their funding. Part of our Local Schools, Local Decisions is for a professional principal to make decisions in his school as to how he is going to spend his money. That is part of the planning. If he chose to do that, that is a conversation that he and I will have as part of his professional development plan and as part of his one-on-one with me.

**The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES:** Following on from that, can I ask why he had to do that? Did he give a reason? Was it because the department's tools were not adequate to meet his needs?

**Ms MERCHANT:** No, he has decided that that is something that he has seen from another school. They had done it in the past around English. The data they had back from that and the peer principal on principal—I think they are ex-principals, so the conversations and things that came through was valuable evidence for him for improvement and that is something that he can work on with his staff and hang his hat on to say that these are the recommendations. We have had people come in to do this, and these are the steps that they recommend to go forward.

**The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES:** Is that evidence then shared so that other schools can benefit or the department can benefit from those recommendations?

**Ms MERCHANT:** This particular group of schools work well together, so they would absolutely share that. My high schools work well together, so they would share that information, and we come together and talk about those sorts of things.

**The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES:** Is that shared at a State level to then be shared with other regions?

**Ms MERCHANT:** No. Within our network we have various learning communities, so they will share within themselves. They will go to other schools and share best practice.

**The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES:** I am more interested in whether the department proactively utilises the information that other schools gather on best practice and pass it on to other communities within the State.

**Ms SHAW:** It is in different ways, I think, in respect of case studies.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Sometimes.

**Ms SHAW:** Yes, for different purposes.

**The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES:** But there is no requirement to do so, or it is not encouraged?

**Ms MERCHANT:** No, but we do put up school snapshots, so where schools are doing something—be it disabilities or whatever it happens to be, where schools have got best practice, we put the snapshots up and they are shared as well. We try to share best practice as much as we possibly can, and we have strong networks within the Southern Tablelands where we work together and share that.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I will go to a different point. Teacher training and professional development. We have had witnesses today and witnesses in other inquiries saying that professional development—properly teaching teachers how to deal with students with special needs—is essential. Do you agree with that?

**Ms MERCHANT:** Yes.

**Ms SHAW:** Yes.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** The example we got of funding here today was that a school has a special development budget which equated to about \$525 per staff member, but of course if they want to take the staff member off for a day to do training, it is \$420 for the casual, which leaves a grand total of \$100 to pay for transport, the course, accommodation, and food. The numbers do not work for me. Do they work for you?

**Ms MERCHANT:** It can be hard, and if you go rural and regional it is even harder, because it is not taking one day to travel, and accommodation on top.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** This must be a common stress that you are getting from schools?

**Ms MERCHANT:** It is. Across the board, the biggest stress for my schools is not so much that they have not got the money, it is more they do not have the casual teachers, so even when they have somebody who wants to take the classes, it is a real difficulty.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** On the figures I gave you, you have a casual teacher and there is nobody for training. Are these the kind of resource issues that are hitting schools on a regular basis in your area?

**Ms SHAW:** I think there are a number of tensions there. There would be some schools that would certainly say that we do not have the time either. We would love to do the professional learning but by taking ourselves away too much from our business at hand, that impacts too.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** How do we fix it?

**Ms MERCHANT:** The professional learning money they have got is not the only money. They have a per capita funding for children, so there are other avenues you can look at.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** They could get the money from an SLSO?

**Ms MERCHANT:** No, it does not have to be an SLSO. An SLSO is not always the best strategy.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I am saying you need a proper bucket of money for training, otherwise you will be robbing other empty buckets. What is the answer on training?

**Ms SHAW:** I think it gets back to where we were at the beginning of this conversation, which is really about the way in which you would pool the money so that you can make the best use of it, so that you can in fact ensure that your teachers get professional learning and you make a difference to the quality of each teacher in the school.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** We have resource constraints in terms of inadequate funding for special needs education, we have resource constraints in respect of adequate funding for student development. Then every teacher, every principal will say the same thing—many of our parents do not have the skills and the capacity to fill in the forms and do the applications to get the additional funding that their kids need, and they have to use teaching resources to do that. How do we fix that? If we cannot fix the other two, how do we fix that?

**Ms MERCHANT:** I do not know that is the case in every case. There are schools that have the money that find it difficult to spend, so we are here—

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** We have not heard from a single one of them.

**Ms MERCHANT:** There are schools that do have—particularly from National Partnerships or something like that previously, and the school that I was in was one of those. I could employ lots of—

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I would really appreciate if, on notice, you gave me a list of the schools in your region that have too much funding.

**Ms MERCHANT:** No, I will not say too much funding. I am saying they are not running out.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I am serious. If you are going to give that evidence, give us on notice a list of schools that have not been able to spend their funding,

**Ms MERCHANT:** I can give you a list of schools that are spending the money appropriately and spending it within the year and not necessarily very tight.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Let us be clear: Your evidence was that schools cannot spend their funds. Give me a list of the schools that you know of in your region that have too much money or are unable to spend their funds. You can do it on notice.

**Ms MERCHANT:** I can say that there are schools that do it really well, that do it with flexibility and do not necessarily run out of money. Things can be tight, but you get the year's budget and you spend it within that year, not asking to carry over heaps of money. I understand that for some of these schools the funding is very tight, and for those with complex needs it is even tighter, but a lot of our schools are funded well and are able to do the things that they need to do without the fear of running out of money.

**Ms SHAW:** They are funded well because there are the different loading areas that make that school very complex and difficult, so it is about low socio-economic, disability, high Aboriginal student enrolment and so on, so that makes the school attract more RAM.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** What funding is there? What acknowledgement in the funding is there that teachers instead of teaching, and counsellors instead of counselling, will be sitting down for five hours with parents and filling in forms to access the basic funding? Where is that money being allocated in the RAM funding? Where does that come from?

**Ms MERCHANT:** Some of that will be from that funding. It will be for that time, for teachers to sit with those parents and look at the needs of the students. Some of it will be filling out forms, but that teacher is often the best person to do that. They are the ones who know that student. It is not necessarily a good thing to have an admin person do that, because the teacher knows the student and knows the information that needs to be given to others to access more support. Part of their relief from face to face [RFF] might be time to do that, half an hour before school, or the learning and support team meeting. That will be the place where they gather that information.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** So the teacher will be talking with the highly disadvantaged parents who are hard to engage with who have little literary skills and do that in the half an hour before school? That is not your solution to it, is it?

**Ms MERCHANT:** No, I am saying that it may be part of the learning and support team, it may be part of their RFF team, at times, it may be the conversation we have when we meet with parents around reporting.

**Ms SHAW:** It might be at the beginning of the year when you are getting to know them and building relationships with people, when you are welcoming them in without any agendas, but you are trying to get to know them and build some sort of relationship.

**Ms MERCHANT:** As a principal, I would give my staff time to do that. We may provide extra relief for our staff. The supervisor, the assistant principals, I used to give them extra time as well.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** I would like to come back to the training point. On the professional development front, we heard about some of the other sorts of training that might be going or be priorities in the school. I presume that one of the reasons in some schools the disability training is not getting done, we heard early on in the hearings it is being rolled out to a significant number of teachers across the State, but I presume in some places it is not being done because of those other priorities. When it comes to all those pressures, this is one of the things that pops up. Have you got a view about that across your regions?

**Ms SHAW:** Certainly in my network with the disability standards, there is professional learning around that which has been done by a significant number of my teachers, but there is a range of other professional learning within areas like dyslexia and autism and so on that are currently being rolled out and are regularly rolled out throughout the year.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Very few teachers are completing those at the moment?

**Ms MERCHANT:** For my disability I have got 654 of my teaching staff and 71 of my executive staff in the Southern Tablelands. The teapot ladies, a group in Goulburn who support autism, rolled out a conference at the beginning of the year which quite a few of my teachers in the Goulburn area attended. I ran a staff development day where I did not charge teachers, and invited teachers. So we had 280 teachers participate in that. Part of that was around positive education and making adjustments. There was visual literacy. So we are providing some of those things as well. We run a network. We have a support teachers network which started with five teachers and which now has 35 teachers, and they support each other. So we have done lots of things as a network that do not necessarily cost and that provide support families.

**Ms SHAW:** Certainly in my network, Curriculum Network Illawarra has a special education learning support teacher network which runs across all of the secondary schools. They are beginning to involve the primary as well in that and they do ongoing and good quality courses for teachers.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** We have noticed one striking thing after talking to people. The schools that are doing this well and the communities that are aware of these issues are doing this training and are aware of these issues. But it really is an issue of getting it out into other schools.

**Ms MERCHANT:** I think communication, or perception of communication, is one of the biggest things that we need to work on—making it easy for parents. I understand that there is a lot of information there for parents to access. Some of the parents that I have worked with do not have the literacy capacity to be able to go through some of that stuff, so that is a challenge. I think that is a challenge in anything that we do. Communication is one area.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** I am interested in the funding model for the SSPs in your area. The fact that it is based on a primary school model to me sounds unsustainable. That has been a recommendation of other committees of the New South Wales Parliament. Do you have any views that you could put forward to the Committee?

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Primary school funding for high school children.

**Ms SHAW:** I have two SSPs. When I have my conversations with them they talk about their funding and how they use that. Again it is a conversation about how we use all the funding that we have in our school, not just specific buckets of funding for things that are needed. That is something that has to be negotiated and I think that is challenging. I certainly think they are doing the best job that they possibly can.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** I do not disagree with that. Is it not just discrimination to apply this model through the system? That is what it looks like.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** A whole lot of buckets are missing. You say it is not about looking at individual buckets, but for these schools a whole lots of buckets just are not there. You must acknowledge that it is a problem.

**Ms MERCHANT:** Absolutely. There are some areas that I think we should have within those schools. I think those schools should be entitled to an instructional reader, the same as what our primary schools are, or our high schools are.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** What about a PE teacher? Surely kids with special needs have the same requirement to play support and engage in physical activity?

**Ms MERCHANT:** I will not argue. A primary trained teacher too is trained across all those things. As a primary trained teacher, and using the curriculums, I still have some of those skills. I will agree that if an SSP sets that up as that particular model that is going to be hard. But I believe that there are different models that can be set up too; it is not necessarily the one model.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** What about transition to work?

**Ms MERCHANT:** I agree. Again, if I look at one of the schools that we spoke to earlier and the way that they have done some of that stuff within their own trade training, I think they have done a fantastic job in being able to do some of that stuff. I do not like the idea that because they run the same thing they do not get funded; I disagree with that. I would love to see an exception made for our schools. I think that comes through the VET funding but they should be able to have the same.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** What about food technology? All these things are missing for these high school kids and, to put it boldly, to me it seems to be gross discrimination.

**Ms MERCHANT:** Those particular things, the instructional leader, the careers person, they do not have those, I agree. But we need to have something in place in those particular schools.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** It has to be something that is equal to the students who are attending high schools elsewhere. It may be that there are additional needs and additional funding is required, but it should not be the case that there is less funding.

**Ms MERCHANT:** No. If our schools have instructional readers or career teachers, those sort of things should be available. As far as a PE teacher goes, maybe that is a skill that we already have if you are a primary trained person. The curriculum is there for all of us to use. That is a written curriculum. Recently we had a meeting with the SSP teacher and our primary schoolteacher. So instead of having individual one-on-ones we met together. At that meeting they were then able to talk about some of the things that they could share. I went from that meeting to a meeting with my high school principal where we spoke about the SSP being able to provide training for their classes because there were some issues around those particular teachers being trained

and then for the school to be able to access their hospitality areas. So there are things that we can do in the network itself to overcome some of those things, and that is shared expertise within schools. Again, some of those things I absolutely do believe should be there in our schools.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I commend the work that you are doing with such limited resources. You are sharing it around and it is all excellent. But at the end of the day it is not just here; it is in all the SSPs around the State. Whenever they have high school students they seem to have this chronic absence of core funding.

**Ms MERCHANT:** I think there are certain aspects of it. Their class sizes, et cetera, it is the staffing component that is very different in those particular cases. But certainly I think some of those other aspects would be good. You asked earlier what would be good for them to have. I know that our school employed a community liaison officer and that was the person who worked with our community around filling out the forms. We knew who our parents were who needed that the additional support. Something like that I think would be excellent.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** One of the other examples that was given was of a chaplain.

**Ms SHAW:** A welfare officer, or whatever you want to call them. Something like that is quite good.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** As a standard resource; there is a bridge and a connection.

**Ms MERCHANT:** Yes. I think that sort of thing is terrific. Our community liaison officer is brilliant.

**The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES:** I want to clarify a matter relating to teachers attending professional learning classes. You said that a replacement teacher or casual teacher was needed. Is that correct?

**Ms MERCHANT:** Yes.

**The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES:** Why are these sessions not being done outside school times?

**Ms SHAW:** I guess you are looking either at teachers school holidays or at after school or weekends?

**The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES:** Why not during school holiday times?

**Ms MERCHANT:** Because that would be a Teachers Federation matter

**Ms SHAW:** There are industrial awards around that.

**Ms MERCHANT:** And they are entitled to their holidays. One of the things that I have discussed is that if we were to do that there should be some sort of recompense for them for giving up their time.

**Ms SHAW:** And it certainly does not mean that they do not. Many teachers do that voluntarily. But you could not as a school say, "We are all going to do this".

**The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES:** That is what I am saying. It should be a flexible model.

**Ms MERCHANT:** Our teachers spend a lot of their time already planning in their holidays. I know that out of a two-week holiday you would spend a week of your time. Teachers are a very unusual group, I think. We are just dedicated to the job. In fact, I think we probably spend more time around our daytime children than we do around our real family.

**Ms SHAW:** It never finishes. They are very conscientious and hardworking; almost every teacher.

**The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES:** I was just saying that we should have a flexible model.

**Ms MERCHANT:** We do have staff development days, one a term or two at the end that we can use. Often they are used for mandatory training so we can provide for and have people come in on those particular days.

**Ms SHAW:** There are five days there in a year.

**The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES:** Is that considered at all to add in additional learning opportunities. When you refer to mandatory training would you consider looking at that?

**Ms SHAW:** They are pretty busy with the agendas that already exist in terms of training that they need.

**Ms MERCHANT:** It is a good opportunity to do that mandatory training, the child protection training and those things that we expect. As a principal I might run those sessions at that time within my school to cover that mandatory stuff. A lot of schools have changed the way they have their staff meetings, so rather than just being a giving of information they use some of that as professional learning time as well. Again, in the way that we organise our schools, I tried to get my stage released at the same time so that they could spend some of that time together as a stage doing that cooperative planning.

**Ms SHAW:** And it is a common practice now, particularly in primary schools, to do that so that they can do a lot of work around literacy and numeracy.

**Ms MERCHANT:** Being allowed to use that funding flexibly across all of those areas can do those particular things. Sometimes that is the bit that the parents do not see, that quality teacher training that we actually do. You might use some of it. You might get a guest speaker in or something like that, but that is building up that quality teaching and that is how we raise our student outcomes. Parents often see the SLSO person as being the be-all and end-all of everything but those students deserve the expertise of a teacher as well, so an SLSO might be off doing something else to allow that teacher to work with those students. We need flexibility in being able to do that.

They are the discussions we have with our principals. They are around how they manage this. It may be that they talk to us about the programs or they talk to us about the people, but it is that accountability that goes around with the things that they are actually doing and the provision of how do you know what impact this has actually had and show me the raised student outcomes. That is the audit that we do around it as opposed to telling people that you will be accountable for showing me exactly where every dollar went to. That will come out in the audit that the auditors do or if I had concerns I would ask them to print off the Oasis printouts and show me where they were spending their money. I could do that if I was concerned.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Another issue we have talked about is the complaints handling in the system. It is a large and complex system and obviously a range of issues will come up that individual schools, principals or districts have to deal with. Take that as granted. In this area it is more complex. Parents are really struggling with things at home as well as at school. It seems complaints sometimes get stuck in the system and get to a point where parents feel that they do not know where to turn. Either they are not quite sure how to raise the issues or they feel like they are making a nuisance of themselves in raising these things and it compromises their ability to deal with it properly. They have taken it as far as they can but they really feel like sometimes it is them against the system—sometimes possibly wrongly but that is how they feel. What is your view about having an independent process outside of the department that is there, hopefully for a very small amount of the time, to allow these complaints to be assessed as to not just the process but also the facts of the matter?

**Ms SHAW:** Could you clarify that a little bit? There are channels and processes that exist outside the department in terms of the Ombudsman and things like that when things get to that level. That is not what you are meaning, is it?

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** No. Certainly the view that has been put to us is the processes that are there, including the Ombudsman, that often look more at the process of the complaint rather than re-prosecuting the facts are not working in that way for a second look at a decision and it is often a case of the department looking at itself. That might work some of the time but you would think it would not work all of the time in other parts of government or in other organisations.

**Ms MERCHANT:** If a complaint has gone through the Ministerial type pathway and we have responded to it and the parent is not happy with that or the person or teacher is not happy with that there is the opportunity to have that reviewed but again it is an internal one. It could be somebody that we have employed outside but is still connected to education to review it. It is a second look, a second pair of eyes that are actually put over it, and then it is the external. That is the system that is there to use.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Evidence has been put to the Committee either in private or in public about some incidents that are frankly pretty concerning, particularly about restraint and exclusion. When it comes to students with disabilities there are parents who feel they are getting pinballed around the system when the system is reviewing itself. Do you feel, with your perspective on the system looking across a range of schools, that there is some merit in having some sort of external review above what is there at the moment?

**The CHAIR:** You can take the question on notice if you wish.

**Ms MERCHANT:** I think probably there is. I am not 100 per cent sure who would be placed in the best position to do that.

**Ms SHAW:** I do understand what you mean but that is something that I think needs a bit of thought. I would like to take that as a question on notice.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Sometimes if people feel like the organisation is investigating itself, regardless of the merits of the decision, they feel like a job has been done on them. There is the "justice not only being done but being seen to be done" benefit, which might end many complaints a lot earlier. That is one thing I would ask you to take on board.

**Ms SHAW:** Yes. We do get the intent.

**Ms MERCHANT:** I think because if you are waiting for the Ombudsman or for that external review it takes quite a long time to get to that particular point. I had three boys. I know concerns for my mainstream children are hard enough, let alone with the complexities of disability on top of that. The frustration that may come with that length of time if you believe that you are caught in a spiral would be quite hard. At that principal-peer level or even somewhere in there maybe there is—

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I think the suggestion to take it on notice would be quite helpful.

**Ms MERCHANT:** And give an opinion on it, yes.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** On the question of restraint, we have had evidence that school policies and practices may vary according to the needs of the school community. The suggestion has been made that parents might not be aware of those policies in all cases. Where should parents look for that information?

**Ms SHAW:** About restraint, do you mean?

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Yes.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Non-violent crisis intervention.

**Ms SHAW:** We certainly have training but we have some legal bulletins about that to set out what we in schools can and cannot do.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I think it is Legal Issues Bulletin No. 9.

**Ms MERCHANT:** Well done. I do not know the number. Often our parents will ring into our Educational Services team within the office. I am lucky in the situation where I am that we have two directors and a lot of Educational Services members sitting within my office. The communication we have is very open on a daily basis. Often we are talking with the Educational Services team and the Wellbeing team about that. Parents will often ring in and talk through issues. If there has been a restraint or something like that we will call the Educational Services and often they will do the explanation to parents as well. But, again, I think there is room for improvement in our communication to parents around all of those things. I think maybe some of that for principals is the time restraint. Often we try to put stuff out to parents. How do we do that? If we put it out in information it is not always accessible. If we put it out in meetings they are not always accessible by parents either. We can put out stuff but it still will not get to 100 per cent of parents.

**Ms SHAW:** I think almost all teachers and certainly all principals would view the taking of those sorts of extreme actions very, very seriously. I think they are well aware of their responsibilities and the self-reporting to Employee Performance and Conduct [EPAC] and the fact that that needs to be investigated. That is done in that way. Granted EPAC is internal to the department, but it sits outside of our operations and that process does in fact take place and self-reporting is mandatory.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Often it is tempting to say that principals should do X and Y and do more training. They have had a significant increase in their workload with Local Schools, Local Decisions. There is ever more complexity in the regulatory framework. Are principals pretty much at an overload point now? Can we put more duties on them and expect more outcomes from them?

**Ms MERCHANT:** One of my next discussions with my principals is to look at what we do in schools and what can we drop off, and principals are not good at dropping off, schools are not good at dropping off; we tend to hang on to all of the things. One of the things at our next network meeting is to have a look at the things that are essential for student outcomes and to improve student outcomes—essential things within our school—and what are the things that we are doing that we can drop off a little. So yes, it is like overload, absolutely.

**Ms SHAW:** I certainly agree with you about that. I think that this is something that sits at the forefront of our work when we are talking and working with principals. But I also think that it is about that notion that they are leading and managing a school and, yes, they have a huge range of responsibilities around that. But

where they can, in terms of things that are administrative, actually take those things away and give those to somebody else to do so that they can actually concentrate on what they are doing educationally.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I am sure every principal you say that to will say, "Well, who else is going to do it?"

**Ms MERCHANT:** One of the conversations I have had recently with the principal was around employing business managers, because they can pick up some of the work health and safety and administrative side of things. But that particular principal would not employ a business manager because that was taking away from the face-to-face stuff of the students.

**The CHAIR:** That is another cost and that is other money that could be going back to students. Can you take something on notice for me? Can you go back, think about ways to improve the system and give us your personal opinions on how you might improve the system in regards to children with disabilities, in regards to parents and in regards to taking pressure off the principals, as Mr Shoebridge put it? I would like to hear your personal opinions.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I think that is a bit harsh, Mr Chair. They are in the roles of public servants and they cannot give policy advice. I suppose consistent with those constraints.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, within your constraints, but a methodology as to how you see we could improve some aspects of the system.

**Ms MERCHANT:** There are certainly some things.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Low-hanging fruit.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, low-hanging fruit. I would like to hear if you have some opinions.

**Ms MERCHANT:** Just straight up, I think a couple of things, like training our schools in case management would be a very effective way—we are not FACS workers, we are not trained in case management—so that training that goes with case management and being able to pull together different agencies and those skills that sit behind there. But again that is asking the principals to do something else. So how do we manage some of those sorts of things? I have got ideas of what we could actually do but, again, they take some commitment. It is balancing what is new and what we are already doing.

**The CHAIR:** This part of the inquiry is to listen to everyone and then try to work out how we can make it better. Thank you for being here today. If you have taken any questions on notice, the Committee has resolved that answers be returned within 21 days. The secretariat will contact you in relation to the questions you have taken on notice. Thank you again.

**(The witnesses withdrew)**

**(The Committee adjourned at 15:44)**