REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

# PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 3 – EDUCATION

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

**CORRECTED**

**At Lismore City Hall, Lismore on Thursday, 8 June 2017**

**The Committee met at 11:15 am**

## PRESENT

The Hon. L. Amato (Chair)

The Hon. D. Gay
The Hon. J. Graham
The Hon. N. Maclaren-Jones
Mr David Shoebridge

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the fifth hearing of Portfolio Committee No. 3's inquiry into the education of students with a disability or special needs in government and non-government schools in New South Wales. This broad-ranging inquiry will consider a number of important issues, including equity of access to resources for students with a 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.

I acknowledge the Widjabal people of the Bundjalung Nation, 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's hearing is the fifth the Committee plans to hold for this inquiry. It will hear from parents, teachers, academics, and regional representatives of the New South Wales Department of Education.

I will make some brief comments about the procedure 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—if there are any—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 the evidence at the hearing. I urge witnesses to be careful about any comments they make to the media or to others after they complete their evidence because such comments will not be protected by parliamentary privilege if another person decided to take action for defamation. The guidelines for the broadcast of proceedings are available from the secretariat.

There may be some questions that a witness could answer only if they had more time or if they had certain documents to hand. In those circumstances, witnesses are advised that they can take a question on notice and provide an answer within 21 days. I remind everyone that Committee hearings are not intended to provide a forum for people to make adverse reflections about others under the protection of parliamentary privilege. I therefore request that witnesses focus on the issues raised by the inquiry and the terms of reference and avoid naming individuals unnecessarily. To ensure the audibility of the 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, please turn mobile phones silent for the duration of the hearing.

**MEGAN McQUEEN**, Assistant Principal, Wilson Park School, sworn and examined

**BRETT HOLLAND**, Teacher, sworn and examined

**Mr HOLLAND:** I feel privileged to be here today, not for my sake, but to represent the interests of one of the most vulnerable groups in our society. I feel honoured to have been able to teach students with disabilities and special needs, and to have worked collaboratively with their families for some 23 years. As a parent of children who have experienced neurodiversity, diverse learning needs, and chronic illness, I feel that my understanding of individual students experiencing disability and special needs is enhanced by a strong connection with my client base.

I use the phrase "experiencing disability" quite deliberately, because families of children experiencing disability are on a shared journey. The experience of childhood disability in Australia is a shared experience, often over a lifetime of families providing care, support and advocacy for their most precious and vulnerable members. We know that the journey of raising a child experiencing disability can be difficult, and navigating services in education, health and other care needs makes tremendous demands on individual parents, and can strain even the strongest of family and marital bonds. We know that marriages of parents of children with disabilities are under significant additional stress. This is particularly the case for parents of children on the autism spectrum and parents of children with mental health conditions.

The dark side of this bond that I share with other parents is the frustration I feel at the restrictions that are placed on me by the system in which I work. I feel the pain of parents who are similarly frustrated with the educational system that employs me and provides the livelihood for my own family. I have in excess of 20 years of experience in a wide variety of specialised and mainstream settings. I have taught support classes for students experiencing cognitive disabilities in secondary schools, a primary school class for students experiencing emotional disturbance, and in a behaviour school and an education and training unit located within a Juvenile Justice Centre. For the past 13 years, I have been employed as a support teacher learning assistant [STLA], now a learning and support teacher [LaST], in a comprehensive secondary school on the far north coast of New South Wales.

In this regional area we have a dearth of expertise in catering for the needs of students experiencing disability and special needs. Structurally, my education district has only one SSP for students with disabilities and one SSP for students with behaviour disorders. In reality, most students who are referred to the Behaviour School do experience mental health issues, but many are undiagnosed. Our location so close to the Queensland border presents its own unique challenges. We regularly experience families crossing the border from Queensland. This makes it more difficult to obtain information from previous schools. Some of these families switch sides of the border regularly and the education of their children becomes fractured. For students who already experience challenges in learning and behaviour, this exacerbates their needs.

Due to our geographical location, there are very few professional learning opportunities with experts close to our local schools. High-quality professional learning [PL] is more expensive for teachers in this area to access. All schools are allocated a PL budget, but we have the added expenses incurred in travel and accommodation in the centre of PL, Sydney. There are many teachers of special education in this area who hold no specialist qualifications. Most of the learning and support teachers [LaSTs] in this area are either generalist teachers, hold some qualifications in special education or are former itinerant support teachers behaviour.

I work with students with learning difficulties in my school, yet my highest level and most recent qualifications are a Master of Autism Studies and a Graduate Certificate in Emotional Disturbance/Behaviour Disorders. To the best of my knowledge, there is one other person on the North Coast who studied for the M Autism Studies—she is at Coffs Harbour. The M Autism Studies is staffed by some world-leading experts in the field of autism spectrum disorders. Professor Jacqui Roberts has been engaged by the Federal Government to review evidence-based practices, and her findings determine what interventions are funded under the Helping Children With Autism early intervention package, funded by the Federal Government. Adjunct Professor Tony Attwood is an acknowledged leader in the field of Asperger's and high functioning autism, and that matches the profiles of students who are on the spectrum at my school.

I am employed as a 0.9 LaST and a 0.1 classroom teacher in my school. The other LaST that we have is employed as a 0.9 LaST in my school and a 0.1 LaST in a feeder primary school. From my perspective, there seems to be no facility to ensure that all of a school's LaST allocation is utilised for teaching students with disabilities and special needs. In my position, I strongly believe that my specialist knowledge and skills are underutilised. I could be utilised across a number of schools, consulting on strategies for students on the autism spectrum. The Master of Autism Studies that I did, when I did it, in 2013 to 2015, we were told there and then that there were only four Masters in Autism around the world.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Four courses?

**Mr HOLLAND:** Four courses globally.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** And where was your course?

**Mr HOLLAND:** Conveniently for me, Griffith University—that is where Tony Attwood is based in Brisbane, up at Mount Gravatt. For us, that is very convenient. I hope that I not only represent my expertise and views on this subject, but that I honour the efforts of my colleagues in striving to rise to the challenge of catering to students with disabilities and special needs, and, most importantly, that I honour the abilities, dreams and aspirations of students themselves and their parents and carers. Thank you.

**Ms McQUEEN:** I wanted to briefly talk about what I have done in my career, but, more importantly, talk about where I work and what we do. I know you have all been there this morning visiting, but I thought it was important to do here as well. I have been teaching for 23 years. I started my career in a mainstream setting. After further studies I entered special education in 1998. I have worked in a large school for specific purposes in Western Sydney. I then worked in a support unit for students with emotional and behavioural issues in a mainstream central school before transferring to my current school.

I started teaching at Wilson Park Public School 11 years ago. Seven years ago I was appointed as assistant principal. Wilson Park Public School is a school for specific purposes that currently has 68 students from preschool to year 12. As a school, I believe we provide strong learning programs across curriculum for all our students. The students that attend Wilson Park have a moderate or severe intellectual disability. Students may also have a physical disability or autism. Many of the students present with complex mental health issues, challenging behaviours, medical or personal needs.

Teachers provide all students with engaging learning programs where each student can access the curriculum in a socially inclusive learning environment. Teachers, in collaboration with parents, develop individual learning plans that address student needs. Individual needs of the students can include supporting a student's physical access to their environment, mealtime programs including enteral tube feeding, medical needs including administration of medications and oxygen, personal care needs and access to appropriate technology and communication devices. In addition to these needs, staff manage students on a daily basis whose behaviour may be violent toward staff and other students. These complex issues require support above the existing staffing ratios.

Planning and support for students with mental health and behaviour issues requires significant staff time. The allocation of this support is imperative in supporting students to recognise and move towards regulating their emotions. Managing these needs has an immense impact on teachers, schools, systems, families and the students themselves. Time and resources to ensure teachers have the skills to manage the complex needs of the students is of high importance.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Again, thank you for the visit earlier; I think we all really appreciated the trip out to your school. Starting with you, Mr Holland, the kind of complex needs that Ms McQueen was referring to and she is dealing with within her school, I saw you nodding your head throughout the course of that. Is it the same set of complex needs or a version of it? Tell us.

**Mr HOLLAND:** It would be different versions of it. Most of our complex needs are from students either on the autism spectrum disorder or with diagnosed or undiagnosed mental health issues. We rely on funding support to be able to support those students. Up here on the North Coast, a lot of parents are quite reluctant to get diagnoses made. This year we have one student we got through on what is called the profile—the profile of individual needs—without a diagnosis. It is almost impossible to get that. So we have a limited pie in our school of funding support, but we keep having to rob Peter to pay Paul.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** Why is that? We have evidence from other areas that if you can get diagnosed, for example, into the autism spectrum, it is so helpful. Why is there a reluctance in this area compared to other areas?

**Mr HOLLAND:** I think the North Coast is quite different in the parent body, and I am pretty well connected to parent communities in my neck of the woods, which is not quite here. People are very reluctant to pursue that, and in some ways I really understand that because there has been historically—

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Is it a fear of labelling?

**Mr HOLLAND:** It could be a fear of labelling historically. You need to remember how people with disabilities have been treated in the past. Even in the 1970s—and this is adults—we had a big deinstitutionalisation movement. There was a lot of criticism about that, but it was not deinstitutionalisation, it was transinstitutionalisation—a lot of people with disabilities moved into boarding houses.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** Are you talking about the Richmond report?

**Mr HOLLAND:** I am not talking about the Richmond report specifically, it was a world-wide thing, but in New South Wales, yes it was the Richmond report. I grew up in Adelaide and my first job in working with people with disabilities was as a recreation assistant for a very large institution. I was a basketball coach, essentially, and some of the players that I was coaching and umpiring, the team of three of us were the only staff members from that institution that those people ever saw. They wanted to live independently and they saw that that was the way.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Some of it is a cultural reluctance.

**Mr HOLLAND:** I believe so.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** But we have had a very good many submissions from both teachers and parents saying how hard it is to get a diagnosis and that many parents are dealing with very complex family and financial situations, and the cost of getting reports and getting their kids to the doctors to get reports is all too much for them, so either they remain undiagnosed and, therefore, the funding does not happen or teachers spend a lot of their time organising all of that in addition to their teaching.

**Mr HOLLAND:** It actually cuts both ways. There are some parents who are reluctant and where we are, it is very difficult to get into a specialist or to a clinical psychologist to get a diagnosis. It is almost impossible to get into a speech therapist.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** What sort of delays are we talking about?

**Mr HOLLAND:** We are talking about, if you are relying on the community health sector, I know from personal experience as a parent you might get a few visits after six months and then, if it is not working, it seems that your case will be dropped. I know this is the health department.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I am sorry, I cut you off. You were talking about the process. What does that mean, in terms of what the teachers have to do and what parents have to do to get a diagnosis to access the funding? How does that work?

**Mr HOLLAND:** How does that work? Well, it begins with the school raising concerns with the parents. Some parents are more willing than others to come on board and discuss the concerns. There is some reluctance. And sometimes the parents want to do the absolute best for their children but they do not actually have the skills to go out there. And that requires skilled help in itself from the staff of schools as well. We also have the issue where we are close to the border. Some students we have found have had diagnoses in Queensland and then they move south of the border and it is very difficult to get that information. Perhaps the families have not kept the diagnosis, perhaps it is out of date. So there are lots of issues and also from schools. If a student transfers from a government school in New South Wales—

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** But surely that is transferable.

**The CHAIR:** You would think so.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** It is.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Are you talking academically or in practice?

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** No, no, in practice.

**Ms McQUEEN:** It is transferable, you can apply to the schools in Queensland to transfer the records of the students.

**Mr HOLLAND:** We have never, in terms of the guidance files from Queensland becoming counsellor files in New South Wales, to the best of my knowledge our school counsellors have both told me—we have two different ones—that they cannot get hold of reports. What they can get are verbal summaries.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** Paediatricians can pass it on as well.

**Mr HOLLAND:** Absolutely.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** So that is transferable.

**Mr HOLLAND:** It is transferable from paediatricians, yes.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** But that is the key.

**The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES:** Ms McQueen, did you want to comment on that?

**Ms McQUEEN:** I would like to say that is largely my experience working in the school that I work in. We have had students transferring to the State from Queensland and, through the right channels and applying through the District Guidance Officer, applying for the records, we can. It also goes both ways. We have had students move from our school to Queensland. The schools contact us. There is a form you fill in. We then forward all the documentation: Their Individualised Education Program [IEP], their work samples, things like that, we forward to the school they moved to. We offer to the schools that they then go to: You can call and speak to the classroom teacher. As a classroom teacher I have phoned and spoken to classroom teachers of students who have moved interstate from Queensland and Western Australia, to talk to them about what the student looked like in their class, what do they do. You know, I have always found it quite forthcoming, the information.

**The CHAIR:** The school was very impressive to all of us.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** In your opening summary, Mr Holland—and I did not quite get it down—you talked about the two Federal people when you talked about people in the allocation of autism, the Federal person in charge and then another one. Could I just ask you to go back and expand, whether it was praise or criticism, or what it was?

**Mr HOLLAND:** No, it was high praise from me.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** I thought it may be.

**Mr HOLLAND:** Professor Jacqueline Roberts is the Foundation Professor of the Autism Centre of Excellence at Griffith University. She has previously headed up the educational arm of Autism Spectrum Australia [Aspect] NSW. The particular reviews of evidence-based practice she does with Professor Margot Prior. Tony Atwood is a legend in the field in that he is regarded as being a part of the autism community. He is a world-leading speaker and it is very fortunate that the Autism Centre of Excellence was set up there and that they are able to access him. I have participated in some professional learning up there since completing my Masters.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** And with a Masters in Autism—they are not on every street corner—you indicated that someone with your qualifications could be used better. So, shooting the breeze, how do we put someone like you in to be able to separate and provide a better outcome, given the spectrum goes from Asperger's at one end down to vocal delay at the other, and they are quite different in how you handle them?

**Mr HOLLAND:** The Department of Education has previously had Itinerant Support Teacher Autism positions. We do not have any up here now, I do not believe they exist any more.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** And what happened to those?

**Mr HOLLAND:** Under the Every Student, Every School [ESES], it changed the Itinerant Support Teacher Autism's behaviour. I think it was all but the Itinerant Support Teacher Vision and Hearing Impairment, are all subsumed into the Learning and Support Teacher role and that has become a much more generalist thing. But you are asking more what I would term generalist special ed teachers to do some fairly specialised things. Children experiencing mental illness, it is quite different to children with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities and I know there are many cases of dual diagnosis too. It is quite a specialist thing. I can do certain things in terms of working out what evidence-based practice would be recommended in certain cases for certain behaviours.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** So this is your job opportunity, you are going to become Director General—

**Mr HOLLAND:** Well, I do not know about that.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** How do we employ people with your qualification to get a better outcome?

**Mr HOLLAND:** In my school I am very fortunate to have the head teacher I have. She did allocate some time last year out of some of our extra funds for me to do some transition time with students in Year 6 who would be coming to our school this year in Year 7 and that has definitely aided those students in transition, if for no other reason that there is another familiar face around the place and I have got to know how they are managed in primary schools and trying to work with secondary school teachers—and remember, they have seven or eight teachers in a week—trying to get some of the strategies that were working in the primary school, trying to continue those into the secondary school. Because, if something is working for a student, it is worth trying that in a different setting to see if, stuff about generalising behaviours across environments, and it just makes good common sense.

**Ms McQUEEN:** Can I just say—and I mean no detriment to Mr Holland and his Masters of Autism and his training—Mr Holland made a comment about general special education teachers not having the skills that his Masters of Autism gave him. In all fairness to teachers in Special Education, I did a Bachelor of Special Education. I did not specialise in autism, I did not specialise in any specific disability. And I feel that Special Education teachers do a very good job of leading the needs of all students, regardless of their disability, because one of our key factors is, we work with students with who they are and what their individual needs are, more than their actual label of what their disability is. And I think yes, students with autism present with unique characteristics, as does any student with a disability, but I do not feel that having specialists in fields would actually present us with or give us better outcomes than the teachers I see in my school actually delivering on a daily basis.

**The CHAIR:** As mentioned before, when we were at the school, what was very noticeable was the passion, the caring and the love that all the teachers there had for the students.

**Ms McQUEEN:** And as an educator, I would like to think that if you walked into a mainstream school or walked into a school in any other setting, you would see that same passion and dedication from the teachers that were there.

**The CHAIR:** Correct.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** But then the training, specialist training is essential and so whether it is—

**Ms McQUEEN:** I have specialist training.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** That is what I am saying, and I do not think it is a question of saying everyone needs a Masters in Autism or a Masters in this, the concept of a Bachelor of Specialist Education fits the model of specialist training but is every special ed teacher having that base level of education?

**Ms McQUEEN:** No.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I think that is more what we should be looking at.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** I am trying to get Mr Holland a job.

**Ms McQUEEN:** Not all of our teachers are special ed trained. I would challenge you to walk into my school and pick the ones that were, based on the quality of teaching that is going on in the school itself. Because a lot of our skills we have acquired over time, working with students and working with students to match their needs. Special ed teacher training does not equip me to work with every student with autism or every student with cerebral palsy.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** But it is a very good start, surely?

**Ms McQUEEN:** It is an extremely good start, it is. But not every teacher has special education qualifications.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** In some ways you are a little bit different in that way. Your starting point is stronger as a result of that.

**Ms McQUEEN:** Yes.

**Mr HOLLAND:** Absolutely. Wilson Park is an SSP, it is a specialist environment, so people would be learning, your new start would be learning from the more experienced staff. I am more talking about LaST teachers and mainstream class teachers too. I have a Bachelor of Special Education as well. I completed that in 1993. I have since gone back in the two thousands and then in the teens and retrained. That is me, that is just my commitment to learning and updating my skills. I am not trying to denigrate anyone with a Bachelor of Special Education. I started off with that and I taught in South Australia for a little while and I moved to New South Wales.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** You are not going to have the environment where you cross over the skills.

**The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES:** I am interested in the personalised plans for students. The Committee had an opportunity to look at some this morning. I am interested in children with complex needs in special and mainstream schools. How do their care plans differ, particularly where you have children with complex medical needs as well as learning difficulties?

**Ms McQUEEN:** I have looked at other individual learning plans at other schools in other settings. They do differ from school to school, as do teacher programs from school to school. It is an expectation of our school that our teachers do develop quite comprehensive individual learning plans for our students that address all their needs, from their academic needs to their medical or behavioural needs. That is an expectation that is placed on us in that school. I think, like any organisation, the quality of the paperwork differs.

**Mr HOLLAND:** How I would comment to that is that is a very specialised setting.

**Ms McQUEEN:** But then again I also deem special ed units within a mainstream school as a specialised setting as well, and they have the same training as I do.

**Mr HOLLAND:** I have done that before.

**Ms McQUEEN:** We do as well. I know we are a specialised setting, we are a special school, but I think the same expectations should be placed on everyone, no matter where the environment is.

**Mr HOLLAND:** I have developed individual education plans and individual transition plans. That is another item of support specialists we still have, the transition teacher up here.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Your submission repeatedly talks about robbing Peter to pay Paul. In your environment, which is probably different from Ms McQueen's environment—

**Mr HOLLAND:** Very different.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** There are so many demands on funding. Funding that might have been initially tagged or provided on the basis of being for special needs goes to other pressing needs. Is that right?

**Mr HOLLAND:** Not in terms of the funding support dollars. That is largely used in schools—and it rightly should be used—to support the students to whom it is attached. Funding support—it used to be called integration funding—is for individual students and it needs to be used for those students. In terms of myself as a resource; 0.9. I work 0.1 as a classroom teacher. I am supposed to work 0.9 as a learning and support teacher. Out of that 0.9 I also do sport and I am not doing any kind of—yes, I happen to have students with disabilities in the sport that I run, but I have had disagreements with two principals in a row about this. I believe that that should be used to support students with disabilities in general, disabilities and special learning needs. I was thinking about this over the last couple of days. I would have thought that the sport afternoon for a LaST could be used going out to their feeder primary schools and working with those kids on the transition from year 6 to year 7, rather than being used for sport. I would have thought that.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** That makes sense. You are getting closer to that job.

**Ms McQUEEN:** But then would there be someone in your school that would support your students with a disability to do sport?

**Mr HOLLAND:** I am allocated to a sport. My sport job is to run that sport.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** It is netball and tennis.

**Mr HOLLAND:** I am not available to go off, and if I do go off and support a student who is experiencing some difficulty at the time, that can lead to my sport being understaffed and then if we are not meeting the supervision ratios and something goes wrong and someone gets hurt, then that would be not good.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** I ask a question to both of you about the interaction of families and schools. As the Committee has found when talking to people, one of the frustrations that some families feel is they are so involved in their child's upbringing outside the school but sometimes that stops at the school gate. You have read about some of that family interaction, and from the visit this morning it looks like that is in the culture in your particular school, Ms McQueen. I am interested in your views about how that works when it works well, and what we can do to drive that culture through the system.

**Ms McQUEEN:** At our school I like to think we offer our parents an open communication system. If a parent has something they would like to raise with a classroom teacher or the principal, they are more than welcome to phone the school and make an appointment or come in and see either the classroom teacher or the principal and discuss the issue. We do offer home-school communication books for our students because a lot of our students cannot go home and say, "Today I painted a blue balloon." They do not have the ability to do that, so we try to provide other ways that the messages about what the students are doing within the school get home to the parents. I feel we have very good communication with our parents and if they have anything they would like our support with, our door is always open, come in and talk to us and if we can we will help.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Mr Holland, any views from your experience?

**Mr HOLLAND:** When I was teaching in support units for students with mild to moderate cognitive disabilities, certainly I was much more involved in families on a daily and weekly basis. The interactions that I can enjoy with parents now are much more restricted. It is just a matter of time. Most of our students, regardless of ability or disability, are picked up from school and you physically cannot expect parents to be able to park in the car park and come and see you after school. That is a great thing about more specialised settings, being able to do that and I really enjoy that.

**Ms McQUEEN:** Our school is so busy at pick-up and drop-off times, you cannot park and come in and talk to anyone, no.

**Mr HOLLAND:** I do remember being able to do that.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** It is not working well in some areas of the system. Are there instances where it is working some of the time here?

**Mr HOLLAND:** What is working really well are the transition plans, because when students experiencing disability are in a mainstream setting—often the upper primary to lower secondary—it can seem to parents, where is this going?, and they cannot see a future for their child, they cannot see it. But then when we start to look at transition plans, and the kids themselves too, you can do a TVET course in this, you are interested in learning how to—

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** TVET?

**Mr HOLLAND:** TAFE Vocational Educational and Training. There is also S, school, VET. It is possible for the students to do that and it opens doors for them and they can actually see I do not have to sit in that classroom all the time, maybe getting one lesson a week support for myself where I am really struggling to cope in the classroom; I can go out and I can learn some practical skills. The parents can then see that leads to something. Then we can start in year 11 and year 12 to introduce them to some of the specialised employment services—and I have worked for one for 18 months, so I understand the system, although it has changed a lot. The parents, if you have a good rapport with them, will say, "Oh, thank you." It is a relief. They can now see where the future is for their child, and that is a big thing for parents. I really hope that at your school the parents can see where it is going. There is a lot of angst at the moment around the National Disability Insurance Scheme [NDIS], National Disability Insurance Agency [NDIA] and where that will lead to, but certainly that is amongst some of the most rewarding aspects of my job.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** That is useful. A specific question about Wilson Park. One of the issues that has been raised is the primary school style funding formula for SSPs. There is quite a good ratio of staff to students at Wilson Park but what is that primary school funding formula manual missing out on that you would otherwise get access to?

**Ms McQUEEN:** I would say we are missing out on release times for teachers. At the moment a primary school teacher gets two hours face-to-face release from their classroom. It is substantially higher in a high school.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Two hours?

**Ms McQUEEN:** Two hours per week. The plans that I referred to in my opening statement take time. It takes time to develop individual plans for each student, especially behavioural plans for each student which is not just that; we start with a full process. We go from a risk assessment to a behaviour management plan to a visual plan for the student and then we need to talk the parents through that plan so they are aware of what is going on. We then need to support the students to understand the plan and this cannot always happen in a full class where you are the classroom teacher and there are seven to 10 students in that room.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** And all the mayhem that comes with that.

**Ms McQUEEN:** You cannot always have that conversation, and Madeline wants to join in as well. So you can imagine trying to do that kind of thing in a classroom. So that takes time for teachers to develop those things. Another grievance of mine personally, being an assistant principal, would be that an assistant principal only gets, I think, 45 minutes to one hour release per week. Thankfully I have a very understanding principal who realises the work that is involved with being an assistant principal and the other assistant principal and myself—and that comes from our budget—are released for a greater period of time to support other teachers within the school to develop these plans, to implement other resources into the classroom. We might go in and release them so they can go and work with a speech therapist or an occupational therapist.

I might be released to go to an appointment with a teacher to see how a new device, like an iPad which has a communication app on it, or a Eye Gaze system might be used with a student. If there is someone else in the school who knows how that is going to be used, and what is going to be happening, that is time and money that is not actually within our budget. A head teacher in a high school gets a substantially lot more release time to address those issues than an assistant principal in a primary school.

**Mr HOLLAND:** I would endorse that having worked in SSPs, in schools with the same model of funding under the primary school education training unit and the behaviour school. In the behaviour school I taught at I was at times asked to sit in the assistant principal's chair when staff were away, but I was still expected to teach my class—

**Ms McQUEEN:** The assistant principal is a teaching role. We are not non-teaching staff. An assistant principal has a class.

**Mr HOLLAND:** Yes. At that school, five days a week, the principal was off class, and back then, between the executive teacher and the assistant principal, there was a second teacher off class.

**Ms McQUEEN:** I think you heard Helen Rea say this morning that if there is an incident in our school then it takes the three of us. We are there, that is the principal and the two assistant principals, to maintain safety for all but then keep in mind we have left our roles that are primarily in the school to be able to go and do that.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** You say in your submission classroom teachers are not adequately prepared or trained to provide differentiated curriculum and learning.

**Mr HOLLAND:** I did. Did we both do that?

**Ms McQUEEN:** No I did not do that.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Mr Holland, you said it in your written submission. Will you expand on what that means in your education environment.

**Mr HOLLAND:** In my environment we do have some students who are gifted and talented. It is a mainstream high school. We have the full range of ability. We also have students who are experiencing learning disabilities but are very, very bright as well and then we have students with learning difficulties, down to mild cognitive disabilities. Teachers need to be able to program for the whole range of abilities. Up until fairly recently, like a number of years back, you could train to become a teacher in New South Wales without doing any kind of training in special education. Now you do have to.

**Ms McQUEEN:** I trained in 1991-92 and there was a special education component in my generalised primary school teaching. That was one subject.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** The Committee has just received a submission from the peak body, the Australian Association of Special Education that submitted the New South Wales Education Standards Authority has informed it that the stand-alone mandatory special education unit is no longer required in pre-service teacher education programs.

**Mr HOLLAND:** There you go, back to the future.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** What do you say to that?

**Ms McQUEEN:** To me that is really disheartening to hear because I know students present in mainstream with an array of needs that could well fit that subject as well without having to be in a special education setting or a special education school. So to me that is quite disheartening.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** When the Committee visited your school I said that the idea that you just have a class plan and that the 10, 20 or 30 kids in your class deal with a unified class plan seems to be a very twentieth century view of teaching.

**Mr HOLLAND:** It could not work.

**Ms McQUEEN:** It is, and I agree. I think every teacher in every classroom in the State is differentiating their learning in some shape or form.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** What about the removal of that as a mandatory requirement?

**Mr HOLLAND:** Ms McQueen said it was disheartening. I was also think of a "dis" word. As soon as you said that I thought of "disappointing". They are supposed to be the accrediting authority, the authority that drives the standards that all schools in New South Wales, not just public schools, have to meet and now it is saying you do not have to learn about how to cater for students with disabilities and diverse learning needs. That is the message it is giving. I am shocked.

**Ms McQUEEN:** And students have the right to attend any school, and parents have the right to put their child into any school that they would like their child to receive an education from. And that may mean a student with a disability will be placed in a mainstream classroom. If that is what they want to do they should have that right, and the teacher in that room should have some sort of understanding, and most teachers I believe do, but if you remove that component from their training—

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Unfair on teachers and unfair on students?

**Ms McQUEEN:** Most definitely.

**Mr HOLLAND:** It is, yes. In my written submission I made note that if this continues, and if the lack of the resources continues, that will lead to more teacher burn-out. It is a point of stress.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Some have suggested that even just a mandatory unit is not really answering the needs. This philosophy of differentiated learning should be ingrained throughout the entire curriculum.

**Ms McQUEEN:** It should be. I started out as a mainstream teacher and within that mainstream class I would have a group of students who worked up here, above the level of everyone else in the room, and then you would have a group of students that worked in this contingent here. You might have one or two who fit here and then you might have one or two that stand over here and then broken down even further. That is the norm, to me, of every classroom that you would walk into regardless of whether there was a student in there with a disability.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I heard you say sotto voce, Megan, "atrocious" about that decision—

**Ms McQUEEN:** Yes, I did.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Is that a good summary?

**Ms McQUEEN:** It is.

**Mr HOLLAND:** Atrocious squared.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you both for attending today's hearing. You did a great job.

**Mr HOLLAND:** We come from different perspectives but both supporting kids with disabilities and learning difficulties.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**(The witnesses retired)**

**LEE DUNCAN**, Parent, affirmed and examined

**JULIE HERMANSEN**, Parent, and representative of Dyslexia Support Australia, sworn and examined

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

**Ms HERMANSEN:** Yes, I have a statement. Thank you for having me here today. I am here as a parent but I am also here as a representative of the national support group Dyslexia Support Australia. We are probably the largest group in Australia. We have 7,500 nationally, plus other groups all around the different States. Dyslexia affects one in 10 Australians and is on a continuum from mild to severe. To me, learning to read should be a basic human right, especially in a First World country such as Australia. Being unable to read has huge implications for a person's health and life outcomes.

Although dyslexia is common, the understanding of it within schools is extremely poor, to the point where misinformation is frequently given by teachers to parents. This lack of understanding is the reason I spend all my spare time, and my not-so-spare time, supporting my own children as well as parents from all around the country. Because it is an invisible disability, when you look at a child with dyslexia it is not obvious that they have a disability. They are often bright and have a very good vocabulary. They are often experts in finding ways to divert the attention away from what they cannot do, and they can easily fall through the cracks. Falling through the cracks brings with it a whole range of problems—for example, self-esteem and mental health issues. A comment I will never forget was made to me by a GP who had just assessed a 17-year-old boy who had dropped out of school. He had dyslexia, anxiety and depression. The GP's comment to me was: "Imagine being thrown on the scrap heap of life at just 17." They are strong words, but this is reality.

Around 20 per cent of children with dyslexia will also develop anxiety, and another 20 per cent will develop depression. There are also links to youth suicide. A high number of those in Juvenile Justice centres and prisons are illiterate. Within our support groups nationally—of around 10,000 families—it is not uncommon to read that a child at age 8 is seeing a clinical psychologist due to the anxiety of attending school. We also have the distressing reports of self-harm. My own children have been failed by the education system. Their dyslexia was not assessed until ages 13 and 10, and the answer was only found because I never gave up on finding what the truth was. No teacher ever suggested to me that there may be a reason to suspect dyslexia; it took my own research. Once I learnt about dyslexia I found that my own knowledge quickly surpassed that of the teachers and principals that I came across.

I would like to be clear that I do not blame teachers. I know that they are poorly prepared at university for dyslexia and learning difficulties in general. Very few have access to professional development in this area. I have many friends who are teachers; I know they work hard and want to help all students. My own children—both with dyslexia and dysgraphia—are now in years 11 and 9. One is completely disengaged from school, and the other suffers from severe anxiety. Had a simple phonics screen been in place for them early in their schooling, and remediation offered with a good evidence-based synthetic phonics program, their stories could be very different today.

In 2016 the then education Minister Adrian Piccoli announced changes to the New South Wales HSC with new minimum standards of numeracy and literacy, beginning with the achievement of band 8 in the Year 9 NAPLAN. This announcement was a kick in the teeth for those kids who have been failed by the system their whole school life. By moving the goalpost further from these kids, this has created anxiety, and in many cases children as young as 14 already feel that they will not pass the HSC, so why bother trying. My own daughter, who is in year 9, is one of them. Over the past nine months her future dreams have changed from being an architect to being a beautician, because she knows she will not need her HSC to achieve the latter.

I would like to finish by asking that the documents I have here be tabled. They are letters written by children and parents from across New South Wales about dyslexia and the New South Wales education system. I do believe that being disregarded from age five has a devastating impact on a person's life and ongoing mental health and ask you to please consider these social implications when making your recommendations from this inquiry.

**Ms DUNCAN:** I would like to make a brief statement. I thank the Committee for giving us the opportunity to speak today. My background is as a parent who, in my own journey with my child, was often searching for a support group. I did join SPELD NSW at one stage but found it to be very city based. It was not until a few years ago that I found an online support group, which was set up by Julie. We do know each other because of it and the Facebook group which was for the North Coast region, but it is a very isolated journey that you often go on.

When I first discovered that my son had what I suspected was dyslexia, I went to the preschool teacher and said, "I think it's dyslexia," and she said, "We wouldn't want to label him." I had not heard of this fear of labelling before. That happened at school as well. I have a background as a journalist, and I had been researching, digging and finding amazing information and programs in other countries that were very effective, and to come up against this—I did not understand why there was this barrier in the education department to even using the word. In 2008 the State Parliament passed legislation that recognised dyslexia, and I would like to thank Reverend the Hon. Fred Nile, who is on this Committee but not here, because he tabled that legislation.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** And an advocate called James Bond.

**Ms DUNCAN:** I know, the famous Jim Bond, yes. He is still trying to get permission to do his PhD. In 2008 my son was in Year 1, and unfortunately passing legislation and the reforms that are necessary take a long time to make it through to the classroom level. As recently as last year I had teachers tell me, "No, I don't believe in dyslexia." I think that we are beyond the debate of "Does it exist? What is it?"

That is not what I wanted to talk about here; I wanted to particularly address the sort of barriers that happen, particularly in a regional area where, even when there are advocacy groups and support groups on the ground like SPELD, and Macquarie University programs that exist—the Australian Dyslexia Association, based in Brisbane—you have to travel to get some support and find out how you can get an assessment. There are all these things that the parent channels try to find out, but it seems a shame that with an educational issue you cannot go to your school and say, "Looks like it's dyslexia. I've got this problem. How can you help and where is that help?" I found that pretty frustrating.

I would also like to say that there is a famous list of successful dyslexics that we often show to our children, and there are videos, and one that Julie's daughter made, from Richard Branson to—I unfortunately suspect the current President of the United States may also be dyslexic. I am not claiming that one.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** The verdict's out on whether he is successful.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** "Covfefe".

**Ms DUNCAN:** The reason we do that is that self-esteem is so important, and we need to show them that there are great achievements by people who have not been successful in school. These famous people like Stephen Spielberg, Jamie Oliver and Richard Branson will all say, "School was miserable." School is 13 years of your life; it is too long to be miserable. I wanted my son to be able to go through school but to be able to shine before he has given up after 13 years.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** My question is about something in Ms Duncan's recommendations, although you both may want to speak to it. You suggest that the Centres for Effective Reading would help in northern New South Wales, although you have some concerns with how they are set up at the moment. I am interested in your thoughts about those centres, where they are working and where they are not.

**Ms DUNCAN:** I did have the opportunity to visit the centre in Wagga. I said to them, "Do you deal with dyslexia?", and even there people do not like to use the word. There is something that happened in the education department where there is a fear of using the word "dyslexia". But they had programs there and they had access to and knew about things like high-level readers for low-level literacy—high-interest reading material with a low level of literacy. My problem with the way it was run was that the child had to have failed so many other interventions before there was provision of help.

I think I like the idea of a centre for effective literacy because they have lots of resources and they can advise teachers. There was a base where information is available. Early intervention is known as a strategy that works, the earlier the better. You do not wait.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Rather than being last minute.

**Ms DUNCAN:** I had a problem with how the model works and that it deals with so few students when dyslexia affects one in ten.

**Ms HERMANSEN:** I have not had any involvement with that centre.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Can I ask you your views on reading recovery?

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** That was my next question.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** We had an extremely caustic assessment of it by the team at Macquarie University. What are your thoughts?

**Ms DUNCAN:** I am currently studying to be a synthetic phonics tutor with the Dyslexia Association. I have had the opportunity to tutor two children, one in year 5 and one in year 1. The little girl from year 1 had done reading recovery and she was offered to me to tutor because she had nothing after reading recovery and they had to take her out. She did not recognise letters or anything. After doing a synthetics phonics course she was reading little books. I got the letter from the teacher thanking her and we arranged to have phonics-based readers in the classroom. Reading recovery is based too much on the whole guess the word, look at the first letter, it is a more intense version of the whole word system. Some reading recovery teachers will say, "We use phonics." But, if you are using phonics plus the guesswork it is not an effective method.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Some people are suggesting that reading recovery teaches kids how to memorise rather than read.

**Ms HERMANSEN:** Yes.

**Ms DUNCAN:** Probably. One of the things they have found with dyslexia, through brain mapping, is that there is a part of the brain that does not light up. Other sections will light up when they are trying to read but this crucial part is word recognition. They do not have automatic word recognition. A dyslexic child will sound out a word in one line and then get further down and sound it out again. It may be "big" and you think, "You just saw it." It takes a lot more times of looking at it to get that. Anything that is based on guessing and recognising words, for dyslexic kids, is not going to work. For others they do have some success with reading recovery but it leaves a big lot of kids who are going to fail yet again if you are giving them a system that is not designed for their learning. That is asking them to fail again. There are only so many times you can fail before it becomes part of your self belief.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Ms Hermansen, in your support group do you have parents saying, "It was quite problematic but then reading recovery kicked in and everything was sorted"?

**Ms HERMANSEN:** No. In our groups we have about 10,000 families around Australia. New South Wales seems to be the only State still running with reading recovery and the general consensus is that it is not helping these children. They need to learn to decode the words rather than guess.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Do you see any change to that approach?

**Ms HERMANSEN:** From the schools?

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Yes. Or, from the system?

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** They promised change at the end of last year. They said, "Don't you worry about that, it's all sorted."

**Ms HERMANSEN:** We were quite excited.

**Ms DUNCAN:** The new program is moving to the new literacy policy.

**Ms HERMANSEN:** The problem is that a lot of schools have spent so much time and money actually training and investing, and they have their staff and everything set up for reading recovery. It is hard to then get individual schools to go to another program. Something like MultiLit is an evidence-based program from Macquarie University.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** We know that reading recovery is failing kids, and particularly kids with dyslexia. We cannot just let it work its way out of the system, we need to shake it up and address the change now.

**Ms HERMANSEN:** Exactly. I think the Catholic system is probably the biggest offender at the moment with reading recovery. There is a lot of it still in those schools. I agree. That is probably one of the biggest hurdles is the early years. That is when you have to capture them. As I said, when my children reached high school my son was 13 when we finally worked out what was going on. Up until then I thought, "Oh, he's a boy. He's just naughty. He'll get it one day." One day I stopped and went, "How come both my children are doing the same thing when I have a very conscientious daughter." Their mistakes were almost the same. That is the other problem: no-one knows where to send you or what to do. There is no information out there.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** One parent said to me it was like their child fell off the back of a speedboat and it just kept getting further and further away from them.

**Ms DUNCAN:** Yes.

**Ms HERMANSEN:** That is a good analogy.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** You spoke about the National Assessment Program–Literacy and Numeracy [NAPLAN] and the changes that the Hon. Adrian Piccoli put in place. Part of NAPLAN and the higher school certificate [HSC] is examinations. How effective is the reader-scribe system?

**Ms DUNCAN:** My son is in year 10 and he has just had his first lot of exams. He was incredibly nervous. At first he said he was going to have a scribe, but he really did not want one because he thought it was going to be in the same room as the rest of the students, and his biggest fear is looking different and being set aside. He did have a scribe and for one exam a reader as well. He was really pleased with that. It is not HSC but he was very happy with that.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** Does the quality and ability of the scribe have an effect on how they perform?

**Ms DUNCAN:** I suppose I will know when I see his results. I have seen it used in another school where I work. A scribe cannot be interpreting, they are just writing verbatim. They were using students, although my son said he had an adult.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** When my son was at school they used students and he always did better when he had the brighter students. I was wondering whether that was still the situation.

**Ms DUNCAN:** I have not seen the results.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** It is like *Hansard* and members of Parliament.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** Yes.

**Ms DUNCAN:** It does raise the question, because there is technology now that you can speak and it will write or you can touch type. It is easier to touch type. A lot of kids have trouble with the long form of writing. There is no allowance to type in exams. A lot of kids would find it an advantage to type themselves and not have a scribe. Because we have gotten rid of typewriters there is nothing that is not a computer, and you are not allowed to have a computer in an exam. I have been looking online to see if there is such a thing as just a word processor, but there does not seem to be. It is not allowed in exams.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I know of some private schools that have a prescribed laptop with a prescribed set of software on it which allows them to be used in exams.

**Ms HERMANSEN:** But not the HSC?

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Not the HSC.

**Ms DUNCAN:** The barrier is what happens for the HSC.

**Ms HERMANSEN:** Can I say, with NAPLAN and the ability to have a scribe or reader, it is very inconsistent across the State. In our support groups we were getting posts a day or two before with people panicking when the school has suddenly gone, "No, your child is not entitled to one." Yet another family with a child with the same condition is entitled. It was really inconsistent and caused lots of grief amongst families. The children were all over the place. As far as scribes, the organisation of them, who does it: I received a call a couple of weeks ago from a local lady with a child in year 12 in an independent school and she needed to find a scribe and a reader to help her son. The school said he could have one but she had to find her own. I gave her the names of a couple of people I thought could help her. That was an independent school that said, "You can have one but you have to organise it." It is inconsistent. The other thing is the kids need to practice. They cannot just sit their first exam with one. Did your son?

**Ms DUNCAN:** I think he did.

**Ms HERMANSEN:** They need a little bit of time to get used to it.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** It is an area that needs to be developed with some proper guidelines and ability. Your point of being comfortable with the person is important. I suspect it is as important as mine, where the result depends on the quality of the person who is the scribe.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** What about the possibility of using speech recognition software and training the software?

**Ms HERMANSEN:** That would be great.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** Make sure Jim Bond never gets it.

**Ms DUNCAN:** My son was using that software on his home computer for assignments and so on. But it does take—

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** You have to train it to your voice.

**Ms DUNCAN:** Yes. Even then you have to check it because some words sound similar.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** Someone who has dyslexia is probably the worst candidate for that.

**Ms DUNCAN:** It might be trickier to use it in an exam.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** If you could resolve the technical problems with it, that would be a good solution.

**Ms DUNCAN:** Yes.

**Ms HERMANSEN:** Yes. It is difficult for young children because they have a real problem with voice recognition.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** They have soft palates.

**Ms HERMANSEN:** Yes. Some of our children also have some speech issues. That is another problem. Obviously it would be more suitable for older kids.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** I would like to ask about the other hurdle for the Higher School Certificate to which you have referred and the new requirements that have been introduced. They are being implemented and are the subject of discussion publicly and in school communities. Can you give the Committee a sense of the discussion in your local school community and what concerns have been raised?

**Ms HERMANSEN:** I first heard about it late last year when it was first announced. Earlier this year my daughter attended an assembly for year 9 where it was announced. I had already semi-prepared her; I talked her through it. I said, "It will be fine, we will find a way around it, and it will be alright." But she was really anxious. She straightaway said, "I want to be able to get my Higher School Certificate, but I am not going to be able to do it." I also got a message that night from a friend whose daughter is in the same year. She is probably borderline dyslexic, but she was the same; she was highly anxious about it as well.

These kids are putting pressure on themselves to achieve from the age of 14. The problem for them is that they missed so much at the start. We are then saying to them in year 9, "This is what you have to achieve." How will they solve that? How will they help these kids to achieve that? I have not seen any solutions. It seems that things were moving and changing a little bit. We have asked about what kind of accommodation may be available for children with learning difficulties, and we have been told there will be some.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** That needs to be clarified very rapidly.

**Ms HERMANSEN:** Yes. If they are allowed proper accommodation, will they still be able to achieve an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank [ATAR]? Will they be able to achieve their Higher School Certificate? They are a couple of questions that we have being trying to get answers to. Our biggest issue is that if they have not managed to teach these kids until they are 14 years of age, which is the prime time to teach them, how will they cram it in when the end of their schooling is already so busy? It is like a knee-jerk reaction. We need to start at the beginning.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** It is good to push the school system towards higher standards, but what you are describing is a situation where kids are changing their life decisions based on this intervention in the school system partly because it is difficult to know what is going on, and how this unfolds.

**Ms HERMANSEN:** Exactly. My daughter did not sit NAPLAN this year. She already suffers quite severe anxiety. I told her that we would not force her to do it because I knew that when she got those reports she would be nowhere near the band.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Has she sat the NAPLAN test in the past?

**Ms HERMANSEN:** She did when she was younger.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** But found it quite stressful?

**Ms HERMANSEN:** Yes. I knew that she would be heartbroken to receive the results and to know that she was nowhere near band 8. She might be around band 5 or band 6. She is definitely not up where they want her to be. Verbally she is fine, but—

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** What do you and the parents you are talking to need to have clarified about how this might work? They are concerned about this intervention, but what would make it easier?

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** Can you also tell the Committee what it should recommend and the best way to improve early detection as well? It is one thing to say that we need early detection, but it is another thing to help us through the process.

**Ms HERMANSEN:** I think you need to concentrate on early screening—phonics screening—at the start as Senator Birmingham recommended. We fully support that. Of course, once they are screened, they then need the appropriate intervention. Even though we are screening them, we cannot say, "Yes, there are some issues here." That phonics screening followed by intervention would be good. We really need those accommodations in place for kids at my daughter's level—those who have already missed so much—if the changes to the Higher School Certificate continue. As I said, if they have not taught them to year 9, how will they suddenly and magically teach them between the ages of 14 and 17 or 18? The accommodations would have to be put in place.

**Ms DUNCAN:** Until year 3 they are learning to read, and from year 3 onwards they are reading to learn. The kids who have missed that learning to read support in the early years are falling further behind. They have fallen off the back of the speedboat because the more you read, the more you can read. If you are stuck there, you cannot keep up. In high school there is a compulsory 100 hours of foreign language learning in year 7 and year 8. My son absolutely hated Japanese. They were hours when he really needed English tuition; he did not need a second language. Some kids with dyslexia may like that and want to do it, but that is 100 hours that could be used better for literacy support for the kids who have this gap.

I agree that we need to help kids to reach good literacy standards. But it is not their fault that they have not achieved that. They are in class, but they are not being taught in a way that they can learn. That is what needs to change. There are ways that they can be taught. There are examples in other countries of other ways of supporting them. There are ways of supporting literacy throughout high school. To say, "We are going to test you and if you do not pass we will test you again and again", does not work. Nowhere in this new program does it say that they are providing new literacy supports to help kids to get to a workable level of literacy before leaving school. The impetus needs to be on the teaching and provision of good support for these kids, particularly the ones who are now past year 3 and who really need full-on support. That 100 hours of teaching comes up in a lot of dyslexia discussions. It is an opportunity that is worth examining. It should not be one parent asking for a little concession for their child. Can we have some leadership?

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** You do not want your children failing to learn Mandarin for 100 hours when they have not yet learnt how to read English. That is the issue.

**Ms DUNCAN:** Yes.

**Ms HERMANSEN:** It is compulsory in New South Wales, but in other States they can opt out. I know that in Queensland they can opt out. But, again, as you said, they should have something to do during that time that will benefit them. I asked about that when my son was in year 7. He could hardly read or write English, why were they teaching him French? It is a completely different style of language. They said I could take him out, but they had nothing to give him to do.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** It should not be a free pass; there should be an opportunity for intervention.

**Ms HERMANSEN:** That is what I thought.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** There could be intensive language tuition, but the language they need is often English rather than a foreign language.

**Ms DUNCAN:** That raises another issue. Where support is offered at secondary school it involves pulling kids out of classes. My kid had various literacy interventions, but that took him out of art, which was the one subject he really liked and wanted to do. Pulling them out of a class, especially in high school, does not work; they will refuse to go, which is what my son did. I questioned whether I got him all the advantages that I could have. That 100 hours would also stop them pulling them out.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Until I read your submissions I was not aware of—and then I did a small amount of online searching—this questioning of dyslexia, despite the fact that someone I work with has dyslexia. Is it a thing in schools where it is getting pushed back and teachers saying it does not exist?

**Ms HERMANSEN:** Yes, and there is lots of misinformation. One of the biggest problems we have with schools is that if a parent says maybe it is dyslexia, the teacher recommends they go and see a behavioural optometrist. That is one of our pet hates because—

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** The coloured glasses.

**Ms HERMANSEN:** That, plus any sort of eye exercises, because dyslexia is neurological, it is not to do with the eyes. And mostly that misinformation is coming from schools sending them off to get their eyes tested or to get the coloured lenses, because they have done fantastic marketing with those coloured lenses.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** We have got a few sets of those.

**Ms DUNCAN:** You can spend a lot of money on it.

**Ms HERMANSEN:** That is where I started. The school, of course, did not know anything about dyslexia, and there was another child in the room with blue lenses and I went, "Is that for dyslexia?" "Oh yes", so off we went and they call themselves dyslexia screening—Irlen dyslexia, which really, as I said, it is a visual issue.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** It is a rip-off.

**Ms HERMANSEN:** It is that misinformation that is coming through from—

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** We are finding even now kids sitting in class with tinted glasses, allegedly to deal with dyslexia.

**Ms HERMANSEN:** Yes, absolutely, it is huge; it has been big business. It is in our groups all the time.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** Snake oil.

**Ms HERMANSEN:** There is no evidence there. The actual syndrome, Irlen syndrome, is not a proven syndrome as such. One of the girls in our group is an evidence freak and that is all she does with her spare time—reads up on these documents and studies. There is no actual evidence. Even with the Irlen lenses and the behavioural optometrists, we contacted the Royal Australian New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists and asked them their view on behavioural optometry and learning difficulty and they wrote us back a statement basically saying that they do not endorse it, that they do not believe that it can help learning difficulties in any way.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Could you provide us with that statement afterwards?

**Ms HERMANSEN:** Yes, I certainly will.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Ms Duncan, have you had resistance? Is it the occasional teacher or is there a failing in the system to identify dyslexia as a real thing?

**Ms DUNCAN:** I think it is basically because parents have done so much research. I had a principal tell me a couple of years ago, "Look, you've got to understand, we went through a system where we were told this was a myth created by middle-class mothers of underachieving kids." When they went through university dyslexia was a fantasy, and that is what we are up against: a whole generation of teachers—I used to look up dyslexia on the New South Wales education department website and there was nothing.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** But if you did it now what would you find?

**Ms DUNCAN:** There is one unit that teachers can do—an in-service unit—but that is an online and face-to-face course, one unit. There would be so many schools where nobody knows anything about dyslexia. So many times, it is like with the NAPLAN accommodations: you might be lucky with one school and one teacher, but it is an individual thing and it should not be the luck of the draw whether your principal or teacher understands it or not. I had a fantastic principal a couple of years ago when I was enrolling my son in high school, and he said, "Dyslexia—you've got to look for the gift in that", and I thought fantastic, somebody was not reeling and saying there is no such thing. A learning support teacher said to me this year, "Oh well, there's still a lot of debate about that", and I thought, "This is the learning support teacher"—I was sort of a bit horrified.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** You both cite the Australian Dyslexia Association's statistic of one in 10 people being on the dyslexia spectrum. Could you provide us with the reference for that and the data for that?

**Ms HERMANSEN:** Sure.

**Ms DUNCAN:** Yes.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** And what does the spectrum mean?

**Ms DUNCAN:** The continuum.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Or the continuum, sorry, you are right.

**Ms DUNCAN:** One in 10 is very conservative.

**Ms HERMANSEN:** In America they are saying one in five. We go with one in 10 here in Australia.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** That is conservative.

**Ms HERMANSEN:** I think a lot of people have dyslexic traits. It affects you in many ways; you can have it very mildly—you might not know your left and right, like me. There are little things that you can get by in life with and then you have more severe children or people, that it affects them in a much stronger way with their working memory, their reading ability, their writing ability, their spelling—just their whole life, it can affect their whole life.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** So rather than an occasional opt-in training module post graduation, could this be something we are teaching teachers at university?

**Ms HERMANSEN:** At university, yes. That is something that our group have been trying to bring to the attention of the various universities as well, trying to get that in there.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** But it will not be enough to just do it in the pre-service training, given the culture you are describing. It actually has to be driven through the system as it stands at the moment and, taking Mr Shoebridge's point, opt-in training will not do it.

**Ms DUNCAN:** It is pre-training—

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** The sort of teachers you are describing, Ms Duncan, need to have this drawn to their attention?

**Ms DUNCAN:** Yes.

**Ms HERMANSEN:** And consistent information, because, like I said, there is so much inconsistency. When we first started talking about dyslexia and approached teachers about it, a few people said to me, "There are so many different kinds", and I said, "What do you mean by there are different kinds?" "Oh, there's the one where you wear the glasses, and there's this one and this one." Because I guess it is another name for a specific learning difficulty, I think that is where it gets really confused for teachers and it is hard for them. But if they have had no training and very little background—I have heard at least once, probably more than that, being in this national group, of teachers who have been teaching for 20, 30 years who said, "I have never ever taught a child with dyslexia." We just look at them and go, "You're joking", because you have got two or three in every class; it is just that they are either hiding it very well or they might be quite gifted and their memory might be getting them through. But they are definitely there.

**Ms DUNCAN:** I had an example of my son got a result in his school report in primary school and the teacher said, "His written work does not reflect his deep understanding of science." I thought "Well, there is an issue for you", but that was just written off as that was just the fact. I thought: there is a problem—how is he going to show what he knows if there is that problem? Another thing you would come up against was, "There's no funding for that." That is why the teachers had no interest in telling you it was dyslexia because that is asking them to address something that they would not get any support to do it. My son has been lucky enough at times to be in a class where someone else was entitled to a learning support person so that he could get a bit of extra support sort of snuck in, but there was not extra funding. That may have changed a bit with the extra Gonski support money that did come through in recent years.

**Ms HERMANSEN:** We see a post at least once a week from a family going, "My son has just been diagnosed. I went to the school and they said there's no funding. So they can't help me." Probably more than once a week someone is saying, "The school has told me there's nothing they can do", and we have gone, "Hang on, yes there is", and we point them in the direction—we have got lots of files and information. But another thing that happens constantly in primary school, for example, you go in as a parent and you provide them with all of your information and your child's report, and this is what they need, and five copies of another document, and you get that teacher all nicely trained up and then the next year they have another teacher and you go, "Have you heard about my child?" "No", they do not know anything. The information is not getting passed on.

Then you get to high school and you are dealing with seven or eight different teachers a year. Last week I had a meeting with my son's male engineering teacher—he is in year 11—and he was like, "I don't think that he's not smart because when I ask him for answers verbally he can do really well, but he won't sit down and write it." I said to him, "You know he's dyslexic?" "Oh yes, but that shouldn't affect him." "Yeah, it does." Constantly. I wrote letters to every single teacher and I went in, put them in envelopes, put their names on them and went to the office, "Would you put this in their pigeon holes? Contact me, let me know about assignments and things like that." I got one phone call out of 16 teachers—that was when both my children were at the high school—one phone call going, "Well that's great, yes, I'll email you the assignments." I don't think I ever got an email from him, but at least he rang me.

So that is the passing of information from teacher to teacher. Learning Support says they provide the information in our staff room. I think that our school anyway would have a folder with all the different children with special needs, the information in there and it is up to the teachers. And they send emails but the staff do not always open them and so forth. So that is a major problem for a lot of families where that information is not getting passed on and, like I said, at primary school I felt like I was training the teachers myself.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Ms Duncan, does that sound familiar to you?

**Ms DUNCAN:** Yes, it does. But there are also very simple things that a classroom teacher can do to make it a lot easier. One of the really basic things is writing on the board. A dyslexic person finds it very hard to copy a word they do not understand and having to copy it from one thing to the other and my son used to find he was so slow writing it down that then the teacher starts talking, so you are getting instructions plus you are trying to do this, so you just lose everything. So writing notes on the board is not—if you have a handout and they are highlighting words, it is much simpler, they do not have to be looking up and down all the time, the written stuff is all there.

Then I had examples of, "You can't go and do the science experiment until you have written up all the notes." So my son would not get to do the bit where he would actually learn, because that is how he learns. So, just having an understanding of how these kids learn and what is or is not useful, the written stuff. In primary school it is: Do not make these kids read out loud because their fluency is not there. And you might get a teacher who insists that they read out loud and that still happens. So things that should not happen are still happening. But it does not have to be expensive to be supportive of a dyslexic kid in the classroom. And the Dyslexia Scotland organisation has amazing resources. For every secondary subject they have got these short booklets that talk about how to teach that subject if you have kids with dyslexia. And it is the sorts of resources that exist internationally and that are around, that parents can dig around and find but it would be great if that sort of information—and Dyslexia Scotland has done amazing stuff with government support. It has a lower population than New South Wales and they are very well funded.

**Ms HERMANSEN:** So Specific Learning Difficulties NSW [SPELD] and the Australian Dyslexia Association both run on an absolute shoestring, so they have some support there to get this information out more, and to work with the Government, like Ms Duncan said, to get some booklets and things.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for attending today's hearing. The Committee has resolved that answers to questions that have been taken on notice be returned within 21 days and the secretariat will contact you in relation to the questions that have been taken on notice.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** The secretariat will contact you, you do not have to remember.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you both again.

**(The witnesses withdrew)**

**(Luncheon adjournment)**

**SALLY ROBINSON,** Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University, affirmed and examined

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

**Dr ROBINSON:** I would like to start by thanking you for the opportunity to talk with you today. It is not usual for me to be able to duck down the hill and speak to you, so that is appreciated to start with. I am a participatory researcher, so my research is with children, rather than on children and young people. All my research is with people with disability. So my whole work career has been with people with disability since I started work at 15. I have done a lot of work with people with disability. I have been a researcher for about 15 years of that work career, so I have done about 40 research projects with people with disability, a lot of them with young people.

I am not an expert in schools, but I know a fair bit about children and young people with disability and because I work with young people, my research goes into schools. My research focuses on two areas: preventing abuse and promoting safety, and building belonging with young people in communities. And that is what I would really like to focus on talking with you today about because I would like to talk to you about the way that my work with young people in the school area cuts into those two domains.

**The CHAIR:** That is what we like to hear.

**Dr ROBINSON:** When I spoke to the secretariat they said that you had not heard a lot yet from young people, because obviously in the submission process young people do not do many submissions and it is hard to hear from young people with disability. So what I would really like to do is to bring their perspectives into the room if I can a bit.

**The CHAIR:** I think we do have two final hearings, but continue on please.

**Dr ROBINSON:** I would like to acknowledge that parents do present concerns on behalf of their children articulately and passionately and educators speak from the heart and the head about their professional and their personal commitment to kids' lives as well, and I do not want to undermine that in the slightest. But we do not hear much at all from kids about their own lives. I would like to bring up some key issues that come from the combined material that we find in our research projects.

I have some material here for you, if I can table this. I know how busy you all are so I have just printed off summaries from some of our research projects and the more accessible versions of our research projects so that they are easier to read quickly for you to get the key material from. What I would like to do in speaking with you today is to talk over some of the key issues from that combined material. Research on belonging explores the connections to people and places that help anybody feel that they belong in the world. Recently there has been research interest in exploring the perspectives and feelings of children and young people with disability about belonging. What is particularly interesting about that in your context is that there is a number of key elements that are interesting about school life.

I know you focus quite a lot on teachers and what teachers bring to the experience. Thinking about school life a little bit more broadly for kids with disability, things like friendship, being accepted by your peers, being and feeling capable, being valued, and supportive relationships with trusted adults, are the core sort of things in the school environment that are really fundamental to having a sense of belonging in your school life, for all kids. But for kids with disability those things are a little bit more, or sometimes a lot more fragile and a lot more easily damaged. When that sense of belonging and connection is threatened, there are several areas where that impact is seen for children with disability. Their friendships are limited, they are lonely, the places they can go within the school are controlled or limited. There is tension in negotiating support relationships with adults, and students feel excluded and they are excluded. They are two different things, feeling it and being it.

**The CHAIR:** Are you saying children mixed in a mainstream school?

**Dr ROBINSON:** I am talking very generally, so all different kinds of experiences of schooling. The kids' strengths are not seen by other adults or by other adults in the school communities. One of the things that is a particularly strong threat to a feeling of belonging in your school community is bullying as well. I would like to move on, if you do not mind, to talking about abuse and safety in schools.

**The CHAIR:** Please do.

**Dr ROBINSON:** That is a strong substantive interest of research that we have at the Centre for Children and Young People. One of the summaries that I have given you there is about some research that we did in schools with children, families and education professionals. We have also done work for the Royal Commission in this space with children with disability and high support needs, about safety in institutions, and we have a national project at the moment about safety. I am drawing from that, and of course standing on the shoulders of previous research, like all research does.

The thing that I would really like to highlight to you, if I can only make one point that stands out to you, is that when you speak to children and young people with disability about their experience of safety and harm at school, they say different things than their families say and that education professionals say. What they talk about is how chronic harm is in their lives. They talk about the drip, drip, drip of things that happen in their lives. They talk about being insulted and ignored and minimised. They talk about how those things build up in their lives. That was one of the things that was really important in this study, it was the thing that we were not expecting to find but was really important in what we found.

If I can draw your attention to this one-page table, it talks about the sorts of harm that kids and young people talked about. They talked about things like people speaking badly to them, people making threats to them, the sort of cruel nicknames that people had for them, through to verbal abuse and physical abuse and incidents of harm. What their families talked about were critical incident-type harms, the things that eventually built to something that people came home with, or another person told them about, or a teacher reported home to. But it was when things accumulated over time that families found out about them.

Then educators and child protection and disability support workers talked about some of those other concerns, but they also talked about the more system kind of concerns. I will come back to that in a minute. What I really want to highlight to you is it is really hard to hear from kids about that sort of subtle, monotonous, insidious abuse that they experience. If we can stop that before it builds to the critical incident stuff, kids will have happier lives, safer lives, better lives. For those kids it is better but for all of the kids in the school it is better, because it is building a different pathway for all of our kids. It is a safer, happier life, it is a more included life, it is a more cohesive community life. We are all better for it. So bringing those two agendas together, the preventing harm agenda and the building belonging agenda, is something that is not really being done very much in research but it is very important.

If you turn over that page you can just see everybody's ideas. People have got heaps of ideas. When you talk to kids, they have got ideas about how to solve these problems. Families have got lots of ideas and education professionals have got lots of ideas about what to do.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** There is a lot of overlap.

**Dr ROBINSON:** Yes, there is quite a lot of overlap. People are not in a lot of disagreement about it really. It is a very fraught policy issue. It is a really fraught practice issue. People are frightened to talk about it but when it boils down to it, what people want is to be heard, to be respected, to be listened to and to have action taken when the heat goes out of it.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Can you explain about that last point? What the kids say is responding more quickly and vigorously. Then you say, action taken when the heat goes out of it.

**Dr ROBINSON:** There is probably two ways I could respond to that. There is a lot of passion involved from everybody when somebody comes to school and somebody has been hurt, because there is a lot of injustice, often. There has been all of that accumulation of things that have gone wrong in people's lives for quite a long time by the time somebody's family finds out that something has gone wrong, often. The families who contributed to this research often were very angry about things like not being able to access complaint procedures. The department has got sensational web material. The web material has all the policy material on it that is very accessible. It has got lots of resources that people can draw on but people were looking for local resources where they could go to their school website and see "Here is how you make a complaint" and press a button.

**The CHAIR:** Are you referring to this region particularly?

**Dr ROBINSON:** No, this was done in a couple of different regions. This was done in regional areas but across several regions and up into Queensland as well. It was a universal experience; people wanted to be able to locally resolve their problem and to locally access relevant information quickly so that they could resolve it. They wanted people to be open. Families felt that policy was used as a defence sometimes rather than as an explanation. Perhaps I could talk about what worked well because there were things that helped young people. We did not just ask them in this "What's gone wrong? We asked them "Are there things that went right for you?"

Things that worked well for young people, and for families—the thing that was most important was having a trusted person in the school and that was not somebody who was allocated, that is, having a door with "School Counsellor" on it or whatever the title was, did not work for people. It was about the relationship, it was about having somebody who you could develop a sense of rapport with and a mutual sense of trust, respect and valuing. For those people who had that trusted relationship they could give really lovely examples of how they felt confident to go to somebody—even kids with no language felt confident to go to somebody—and to demonstrate to them what had happened, or that they had a problem and that that person would respond to it and work through the issue with them to sort things out.

The second issue was about feeling known that you were not somebody who was just a number in the system; you were somebody who mattered to the school community, feeling listened to, feeling taken seriously and that action was taken, not feeling that you were just told to go back to class, go back to the other side of the playground, to just be sort of pushed away. When action was taken it mattered a lot to young people. Those sorts of things really built their confidence and helped them to feel that they could move on; that they could deal with the problem if it came up again in the future. But those were not the most common experiences. One of the things that came out quite strongly from that piece of research was that children's voices were not heard well and their voices did not have a lot of authority in the school system.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Does any part of the education system have a good feedback loop from students because it seems to me that the Committee has heard from parents, and parents want to know how to complain, from teachers who have support through the federation and through their colleagues, but the big missing element in our inquiry has been the students. Is there a place students can go to in schools?

**Dr ROBINSON:** There are lots of student council assistants, which works to varying degrees. This is not my area of expertise, student councils. Some of the junior primary schools have whole school systems which operate to build inclusion quite successfully. There are lots of different programs in junior schools. It is a real challenge in high schools to carry through that inclusion philosophy, I think, once kids reach 10 years. I am happy to take that on notice and to provide you with some programs.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I remember from my kids they had whatever personal development was in infants and primary and there was an acronym associated to it. It was quite a positive program where they would sit around and talk about their issues and how they can express themselves but that is not the same as having somewhere to go when things go wrong. Is there a good model?

**Dr ROBINSON:** There are a number of models.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** Earlier you importantly noted that your work is "with" rather than "on"? Would you elaborate on what you meant by that?

**Dr ROBINSON:** The how of doing it?

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** Yes.

**Dr ROBINSON:** We used adaptive methods so that we meet usually more than once with young people and talk with them in ways that they understand. For some people it is like we are talking but for others it is using walk-along interviews. So we go with them where they want to go and they show us the things that are important to them. Some people contribute using photography so they will take photos of the things that are important to them and we will talk about what is significant about the photos. We use adaptive methods—a lot of games which are designed around safety and to talk about the issues a bit more obliquely rather than asking direct questions and answers or using surveys or those sorts of tools.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** What happens when a student dwells on a particular subject. Do you leave it dwelling on it or do you lead them on?

**Dr ROBINSON:** No. We have a protocol that we follow that very carefully works people through, and very experienced interviewers who are used to working with people around these issues.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** Autistic children will pick something that has worried them that day and will continue to dwell on it?

**Dr ROBINSON:** Yes. For example, we worked with a terrific young boy who was eight years. He was very interested in contributing through photos about what he did to be safe and not safe. He had a real fear about being snatched by strangers. Stranger danger was a really big issue in that research, even though that was not where harm to young people with disability comes from. Sadly, it comes from families and people who they know. He took photos of places that helped him to feel safe. We talked about those photos and we walked with him through the places that he went to. When we went to the place that he felt most insecure we talked about that and we kept walking to the place where he said he would go to if he felt unsafe. He went through that place that he got stuck on, to the place that he went to. So he built his own strategy as he went. He finished by feeling quite confident about what he would do if he got stuck in that situation.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Has your research focused on kids with special needs or is it across the board?

**Dr ROBINSON:** My PhD was in emotional and psychological abuse of adults in residential services. Then I have done a study about strategies for being safe in group homes with adults with intellectual disability. From there we did the Feeling Safe, Being Safe study, then the Safe in Schools one came after that and then the royal commission one with people with high support needs and now we are doing the national safety study with young adults which is looking at some of the systemic violence issues that young people face.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** So your research is across the board. Are there distinct strategies that need to be adopted for kids who have got special needs? Is that something that is coming out of your research?

**Dr ROBINSON:** I think the strategies are not different because you have a disability, but the impact on people is disproportionately felt because you have a disability. The social barriers are higher because you have a disability. You are more subject to discrimination. You are less likely to have people step in. You are more isolated, often, because you have a disability.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** It is more that the intensity can be far greater if you have a disability. You are more likely to be the person picked out; you are more likely to be the person isolated. Is that it?

**Dr ROBINSON:** It is more that we need to change the way society responds, not the person themselves, yes. The things that come consistently across all of that work is that we need to reduce isolation for people. We need to build the number of relationships that people have that are not with paid staff only. Not to diminish the role of paid staff: it is very important but it should not be the only relationship that people have. We need to enrich people's lives, and enriching people's lives makes them safer.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** What does that mean practically in terms of attitudes at a school? Let us say you have a child with significant learning disabilities. They have support—often grossly inadequate support—during classroom hours but then—bang!—when they go out at recess or lunch, how do you make that a safe place?

**Dr ROBINSON:** I think it means building whole-school cultures. It means really good leadership, strong leadership. It is a long-term endeavour. In the early school years, there is some really good work happening about building inclusive communities. I think there is a really interesting and important job of work to do. I will be really interested to hear what Dr Gardon has to say next about what is happening across the school system to build in the high school years, to continue that good job of work that is happening in the early years, so that those kids who are coming through younger now are learning alongside their peers with disability. They are not difference-blind, so to speak, but they have friends with disability and without disability. They are much more inclusive in their communities. How do we bring that forward into where the problem is much more entrenched? As kids have the benefit of inclusive education, we need to bring it forward.

Those whole-school strategies need to focus on the kids without disability. Kids with disability know what they want—they just want to be kids—so helping the other kids to enable that means that we are not relying on teachers to police interactions so much because other kids—

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** I want to ask about some of the Australian figures you have provided about kids with disability in schools and the sorts of schools they are attending and how they compare to New South Wales figures, maybe dealing with the number of kids with disability in schools first. The information you have provided to us has not changed since 2003.

**Dr ROBINSON:** I actually cannot comment on these figures. This came out from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare on 5 June. I was not sure that the Committee would have seen it so I provided it for you because I thought it was really pertinent to the inquiry as a new set of very authoritative figures.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** I was particularly interested in the second point about the shift towards attending special schools, away from mainstream schools, and whether that is a trend in New South Wales and other States as well.

**Dr ROBINSON:** I think that would be really interesting to inquire into.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Does any part of your study differentiate the sense of safety or inclusion in special schools as opposed to mainstream schools? Is there any data, evidence or even anecdotal reporting that differentiates the two?

**Dr ROBINSON:** I would not like to make a generalisation about it. I think there are so many things that—no, I would not like to generalise.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I feel certain that you could be bullied in a special school as much as you could be bullied in a mainstream school.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** Are you sure on that?

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I am sure you can. I suppose that goes back to one of your earlier answers—maybe having policy across the board that recognises the needs of students and not having a false binary between kids with special needs and this perceived balance of normality, which does not really exist. Is there a problem in seeing a binary, with kids with special needs on one side and so-called normal kids on the other, or should we be looking at a spectrum?

**Dr ROBINSON:** I think the problem with classifying kids with special needs and kids without is there is quite a significant group of children who have additional learning needs who are not recognised by the system but would benefit from extra attention—

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** There is another group of nerds who get taken out because they are right at the high end of the learning spectrum as well. Would it not be wrong to suggest that we have a strategy that differentiates on the basis of special needs?

**Dr ROBINSON:** The other thing is that kids change, grow and develop all the time, and people go in and out of all kinds of ways of being, particularly if you think about people with mental health conditions—what is a strength in you one day can be a severe difficulty in another week. I know that you need to categorise in order to fund people's supports adequately, but we also need a system that allocates or thinks about creating safe school communities in a different way. I think they are different purposes.

**The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES:** I have a question about sample size. In one study there were 27 students and in the other there were 22. Is that a usual size sample for these types of studies?

**Dr ROBINSON:** Yes, because the young people are very intensive to work with. They are actually quite good sample sizes. They are built on extensive literature and policy reviews as well.

**The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES:** How did you choose the areas and the students?

**Dr ROBINSON:** They are quite large geographic areas and the recruitment strategies were to sample exhaustively across different schools—in the case of the school research—across all of the different kinds of school jurisdictions and other places that children go to. When we did not get enough children in schools, schools found that research challenging. They were reluctant to promote it because it was talking about harm, so we went to young adults who reflected back on their experiences of harm when they had recently left school. In the royal commission one, we went to the institutions where children spend their time and spoke with them about promoting that to parents and children who use the organisations.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Dr Robinson. Thank you for attending this hearing. The Committee has resolved that answers to questions taken on notice will be returned within 21 days. The secretariat will contact you in relation to those questions. Thank you for your time.

**(The witness withdrew)**

**LYN GARDON**, Relieving Director School Services, NSW Department of Education, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** I welcome Dr Lyn Gardon. Would you like to begin by making a short statement?

**Dr GARDON:** I thank the Committee for the opportunity to speak today. I am currently the Relieving Director School Services for Tamworth Operational Directorate, which covers an area of New South Wales from the Queensland border to Newcastle, and west to the New England areas of Tamworth, Armidale and Moree.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Does it include Newcastle?

**Dr GARDON:** Yes, it does. And somewhat south, almost to the Central Coast. It is a large geographic area. My substantive position is Learning and Wellbeing Coordinator based in the Lismore office. This position is a senior position within the school service team which I have held since 2008. I commenced my career with the Department of Education in 1978 as a classroom teacher in primary schools. Since 1991, I have held a number of specialist school-based teaching and support roles, including executive behaviour teacher, school counsellor and senior psychologist. These roles, as well as my roles in school services since 2001, have all in part involved working closely with schools, parents, students and agencies to support the education and learning for students with disability. My broad experience has included working in mainstream settings, support classes and special facilities such as child and adolescent mental health units in hospitals and juvenile detention facilities.

I am a registered psychologist and have undertaken extensive additional university study and research and am passionate about supporting schools to deliver quality inclusive education for all students but particularly those with additional learning and support needs. My PhD research was on student behaviour in school. I continue to have strong research interests and work closely with Southern Cross University Centre for Children and Young People. I am a department representative in a current Australian Research Council [ARC] project and a partner researcher with the centre researching student participation and wellbeing in schools.

I was part of the team to implement the Every Student, Every School [ESES] reform focusing on a high quality meaningful education for students with additional learning and support needs. Since the introduction of ESES in 2012 I have seen an enhanced understanding by school staff of the Disability Discrimination Act and the Disability Standards for Education and what this means for them in their roles in schools. I am in and out of schools all the time and am increasingly seeing school staff have professional development discussions related to disability and learning. The school planning held as part of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data cyclic process continues to enhance staff understanding and ability. While I have increasingly observed this, it is still not universal across all school settings and varies in quality, so there is still work to be done to deepen the understanding across all schools.

The role of school services is to support schools, understand and develop quality learning experiences for all students and to keep abreast of new and emerging requirements such as teacher accreditation. The broader school services team includes the portfolio areas of curriculum, teacher quality, senior pathways, early childhood, Aboriginal education and learning and wellbeing. The learning and wellbeing team in particular covers the area of children and young people with additional learning and support needs, including disability. All members of the school services team work directly alongside principals and teachers. They provide support directly to families, principals and teachers regarding individual students.

Parents, schools, other government departments and agencies are able to contact the learning and wellbeing team for advice or support for an individual student. That team works closely with a wide range of stakeholders as individualised plans are developed for students, some of whom have highly complex needs. In my substantive role I coordinate the learning and wellbeing team to support the 108 schools in the Tweed, Richmond Valley and Lismore networks as well as schools from the Clarence. This team works closely with the Directors Public Schools NSW. Geographically these 119 schools cover the area from the Queensland border in the north to Evans Head in the south and inland to Casino, Kyogle, Bonalbo and Woodenbong at the base of the range. Across this area there are currently 80 support classes in regular and special school settings.

In 2017 the learning and wellbeing team in Tamworth is focusing on professional learning for a wide range of staff supporting students with disability. This professional learning recognises the changing nature of students in our schools and the growing complexity of student need. A suite of professional learning is being rolled out to these groups this year including workshops on revisiting the principles of ESES; effective learning and support teams; effective transition practices using the Auditor-General's 2016 report on inclusive practices.

There are 180 classroom teachers attending a two-day conference in Coffs Harbour later this month where inclusive practices and effective adjustments to enhance learning will be the focus.

I work closely with State office staff and regularly draw in relevant staff to support individual schools as they support a range of students with complex needs. I am personally and professionally committed to continuous improvement and continuing to build the capability of school staff to provide high quality education for all students particularly for those with disability.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Dr Gardon, you have sat and heard the evidence today?

**Dr GARDON:** Yes, I have.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** We had the benefit of a school visit and one of the questions the Committee asked was: how do you share the expertise and the knowledge from that school with the network more broadly and those more isolated teachers providing special support classes in mainstream schools? How does that skill and knowledge sharing happen?

**Dr GARDON:** The school services team work across a variety of settings. Sometimes a director will ask us to do work or a principal or parent phones and it triggers us to start on an individual matter. One example is where we had a call from a principal saying, "We would like you to have a look at what's happening in our school because we are concerned we are not able to have a consistent practice across all staff with some students with very complex learning and support needs." They were in a support class in a mainstream school. When I gathered some more information I took Helen Rea, principal at Wilson Park School, with me and together we worked in that school, helped the school plan for professional learning, for individual planning and we listened to teachers and parents. We gathered a lot of information and paired up teachers from that school with other support people with particular expertise. We were able to draw that team in. They are still working there. That was last year. We have had a range of people working to build the capacity of the staff.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** That sounds really good, but that is one instance. It seemed that what we are talking about is happening on an ad hoc basis rather than there being a network or a system where teachers know where to go and where to look and a requirement that there be a cross-fertilisation of skills. It seems to be ad hoc.

**Dr GARDON:** I know the support class teachers do have collegial network groups. They meet outside what the school services team would be organising.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** They are informal?

**Dr GARDON:** They are informal.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I suppose what I am getting to is should it be part of the role of the department to have some sort of formalised connections so that we have skills sharing, particularly given there are some teachers out there who are no doubt doing a terrific job with the skills they have to hand but do not have formalised training? Should there be a requirement for the department to be effectively making a information and skills sharing network available and resourcing it?

**Dr GARDON:** I think as soon as you set something up that is a "must do" the buy-in from people reduces. What makes these connections happen is the professional and collegial networks. The principals meet regularly and they know who they have in their schools and we know, as the school services team, where the skill sets are because we are in and out of schools all the time.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** So you are happy that they are actually doing that?

**Dr GARDON:** That is within my experience. We call on a whole range of people that we meet. From a systemic point of view, I would have to think carefully about whether or not—

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I am happy for you to take that question on notice and to have a think about it.

**Dr GARDON:** I would like to do that.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** You do not want to create unnecessary bureaucracy, but you do want to foster an environment where good skills are passed on. One of the issues sometimes is coming up with appropriate learning plans for students. For example, in the primary curriculum there does not seem to be an off-the-shelf curriculum designed for kids who have special needs. It is quite labour intensive for teachers to come up with appropriate curriculum responses for individual students. Surely there is a place to share that knowledge and to make it easier for teachers?

**Dr GARDON:** I will take that question on notice.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** You indicated that the region stretches from Tweed Heads to Moree, I think, and down to Newcastle. You were noncommittal about how far it goes down towards the Central West. I suspect it stops somewhere near Mudgee.

**Dr GARDON:** It does stop above Mudgee; it is the Upper Hunter.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** The Committee visited a school this morning and the infrastructure was outstanding. How many and how strategic are schools like that through your region?

**Dr GARDON:** I would need to take the question on notice about how many schools for specific purposes [SSPs] there are. That is the setting you went to this morning.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** That was an exceptional standard.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** It seemed exceptional. The question is how exceptional is it.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** Is it? Are there others of a similar standard?

**Dr GARDON:** I have not personally visited schools in the Hunter. I would need to find out how many there are. In the area that my substantive position covers, there are 80 support classes.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** One of the other questions relates to coordination and the movement into a school like that; that is, students coming in and having that closer supervision and development with a view to them then going into a mainstream school. How active is that? Does that happen often? Does it help, and is it part of what you do?

**Dr GARDON:** Every year the school services team goes to every support class setting and sits down with the staff to review the group of students in the class. That is one arm of it. Support class teachers should be formally reviewing their students at least twice a year. Many would do it far more than that because they are working closely on developing those plans with parents and agencies. That would be a very live plan. In some cases, the plan would be to transition the student back to a different setting—perhaps a less restrictive setting in terms of a mainstream class. That takes a lot of planning. The teachers from the support class setting can work closely with the teachers at the new school. School services can help with that, as can the learning and support teachers.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** Is it an accepted and coordinated process, or is it an exception?

**Dr GARDON:** If it involves a change in setting within the same geographic location, that can be really well planned. However, sometimes a family makes an unplanned move. It is really important that as part of moving from one geographic location to another, the family is supported because they are looking for the agencies in the area that they may need. School services provide a lot of support to families to assist them in a different setting.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** Do you find that families move to find resources like that one? That is, do they move to an area that is better resourced?

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** That is what we heard in evidence in the Illawarra; it is very prevalent.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** I was not there.

**Dr GARDON:** That is not my experience in moving to attend Wilson Park.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** Or a school like it?

**Dr GARDON:** They may move to the geographic area to access services at Lismore.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** I would like to know about your perspective given how much ground you are covering, both geographically and in terms of schools.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** It is a tough gig.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Yes. You have talked about the rollout of Every Student, Every School, and you have acknowledged that of course it is uneven.

**Dr GARDON:** Yes.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** What is the difference between the places you have seen where it has been picked up and adopted well and quickly and places that are struggling given everything else they are dealing with?

**Dr GARDON:** Without a doubt, leadership is an issue, as is staff experience. In some areas there is very inexperienced staff; they are still learning their teaching craft. Some of them were not teaching in 2012 when Every Student, Every School was rolled out. Having experienced staff makes a huge difference. The nature of the complexity of the student is also an issue. Some schools wrap around families and have a very strong partnership with them, and some have a lot of experience in supporting students with complex needs. They have a much better understanding of it compared to a school where the teachers may not have the same level of experience.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** One of the things that has been made clear to the Committee is that training is not compulsory in many areas. That runs the risk of the good schools adopting this, adapting quickly and training well, and the schools that in some ways do not get it.

**Dr GARDON:** Do you mean the disability standards training?

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** That would be a good starting point.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Certainly, not just that training. I take the point that that would be a good place to start.

**Dr GARDON:** The disability standards training is not mandatory, but the messages contained in it are.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Why should it not be mandatory, at least for principals?

**Dr GARDON:** I think the training develops understanding. Whether or not it translates into practice is another thing. I think they are two separate things. Making training mandatory does not mean that the practice will change.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** But if you do not train anyone you will never get to first base. You might like to take this question on notice. How many principals are there in your region, and how many of them have done the training?

**Dr GARDON:** I would need to take that question on notice. I can certainly provide that information.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** It goes back to the point that the places where you need to drive the change are the least likely to have done the training if it is not mandatory. Is that your experience?

**Dr GARDON:** No, not necessarily. It is not only about whether or not they have taken up the training. A lot of schools have taken up the training, and that is part of the professional rollout we are doing this year. They are modulising it and doing in it staff or group meetings to deepen their understanding. It is where a school has not had a lot of experience putting it into action that problems arise. It is two different things.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** I will ask the question another way. How much of the puzzle is the training? Does the practice matter more, or is the training a significant driver of change?

**Dr GARDON:** The training most certainly helps people to deepen their understanding.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** It is a good start, but you are saying that it is not enough. It comes back to leadership.

**Dr GARDON:** And experience.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Your geographical remit is large. The Committee heard evidence in the Illawarra, which also has a large regional run all the way to the Victorian border. A number of principals said that they have a similar training budget to a school in Sydney. However, if they have a training budget of $500 per teacher each year, getting a replacement would cost $300, a one-day course could cost $200, and then they must get the teacher to Sydney and pay for their accommodation. It is impossible for them. Instead, they end up having to spend the training budget on trainers coming to the school after class, when everyone is exhausted, and you are probably getting suboptimal training. Is that the kind of thing you hear as you travel around your region?

**Dr GARDON:** I think the cost of training in rural areas does vary because of travel.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Just stopping you there. Should there be a clear acknowledgement of that in the training funding with a substantial increment for regional schools because it is an obvious reality that we have to recognise?

**Dr GARDON:** We would like to see it done differently rather than not if people have to travel to a city, hence our rollout of localised support. Our school services team support schools; we have funded allocation for people to come and do localised training on ESES and are attending Coffs Harbour. So we are bringing the training in—

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** To the school. But the criticism we heard about that was that often it is rolled out after class and everybody is knackered after having spent a full day with a very intense job and it is the worst possible time to do training. Surely if we are going to get to a level playing field we should be providing the same access to training in the regions as we do in the cities, and that means acknowledging that you are going to have to pay to cover the distance.

**Dr GARDON:** The way we have been working across Tamworth for the last few years is that we work very closely in supporting how schools want to rollout professional learning—so if they wish it during the day; some opt to do it on weekends. But in terms of the funding, that is probably not my area of responsibility, but I am happy to take a question on notice on that.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** The sorts of schools that Mr Shoebridge is talking about are more isolated ones. You are dealing with a lot of regional schools but some are more isolated than others. Are those some of the sorts of schools that are struggling to roll this out as quickly? Is that part of the pattern or is it not, looking at your schools?

**Dr GARDON:** I would not like to say there is a particular pattern across geography, no.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** But you would not be able to generalise it all in that? It is really just school by school, it is highly variable.

**Dr GARDON:** I think it is highly variable in school by school.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** But are you getting the data? Is there a map of your region which you can just pull up and you will find, effectively colour-coded, this is a school that has been training and you can see they are identified; this region is getting the training; this region is not getting the training? Is there that kind of qualitative data available?

**Dr GARDON:** No.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** It must be harder in Warialda than Wollongong.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Yes, but I am just saying is there that kind of qualitative—

**Dr GARDON:** No, there is not a map like that.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** There is not that kind of qualitative data?

**Dr GARDON:** No, but the—

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Should there not be?

**Dr GARDON:** Well, staff move all the time as well. So the difficulty in maintaining currency of that sort of thing would be quite challenging.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** But you know what training a staff member has got and when they move it should just move in the database and you can find out what training they have got. That would be a good starting point, would it not, to actually work out where training is happening—a pretty crucial starting point?

**Dr GARDON:** I would like to have a think about that a little more in terms of how that would actually work.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** Earlier when Mr Shoebridge was asking about the training of the senior level, you indicated—and I do not think you got a chance to elaborate—why that would not necessarily give an optimum outcome in that area because there are other things that should be considered.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** To give Dr Gardon credit, she said she would take that on notice.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** Sorry, I missed that.

**Dr GARDON:** I will take that on notice.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I stopped pushing when I heard that answer.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Can I return to the previous direction? Are you really saying that isolated schools, with all the problems they have got about travelling to access training and fewer help services, are keeping up? Is that really what you are telling us, that there is not a pattern where those schools are just genuinely finding it harder to adapt, given all the disadvantages that those communities and schools have?

**Dr GARDON:** In my practice, I would say that the training aside—

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** I am not asking specifically about that.

**Dr GARDON:** Training aside, apart from the standards training et cetera side, my practice moving in and out of some quite isolated schools is that it is harder just to access agencies. We can provide support in a whole way of school-based and non-school-based people to come and support a school, but sometimes the tyranny of distance for families to access services is very real.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** And that is not just about the education services—

**Dr GARDON:** Absolutely not.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** —that is the whole lot of services that these families might rely on?

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** With the tyranny of distance, how do you do your job? That is just a huge area. How many days a month do you spend on the road to get a working knowledge and to be able to interact with the people? I accept that you are acting in the position, but if you had knowledge of the person that is there, to be able to be at the top and do it and have a working knowledge, how do you do it?

**Dr GARDON:** The last couple of years, one of my areas of responsibility has been the school counselling service and, as such, I have travelled that geographic area a lot, meeting the school counselling teams, senior psychologist education and all school services staff. So I have a good working knowledge of the whole geographic area. In my current role as relieving director, I am spending a lot of time on a Polycom video conferencing facility.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** So Warialda can come into Tamworth?

**Dr GARDON:** Absolutely. I can sit in my office with a team in my office and we can videolink with Moree East Public School, if you like, and we can have very similar case discussions that we would be able to have if we were on their ground. You have to be clever and just think differently.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** So your previous job gave you that knowledge and understanding of the people?

**Dr GARDON:** The working knowledge of that area, but—

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** And now you get around it more through video conferencing.

**Dr GARDON:** I think spending a lot of time in a car is not a good strategic use of time. So where possible we use a lot of videolink.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Could I ask you about the ESES and the resource allocation model [RAM] funding? The flavour of the evidence we have had is that some principals are doing a great job and some principals not so much. A good many parents are arguing that funding that is notionally allocated or has come to the school because of the complex needs of their children is being diverted to other, no doubt worthy, causes in the school and they are not sure who is watching where the funding is going. How do you in your region ensure that the ESES and the RAM funding is going where it is needed? How do you do quality control?

**Dr GARDON:** The Directors Public Schools have that line of direction with principals; I would not be having those conversations. If I was concerned about that I would go to the Directors Public Schools.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** What about in your substantive role?

**Dr GARDON:** The same.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** In your substantive role are you aware of any qualitative control for the spending, how principals are being made accountable for their spending?

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** We did have contradictory evidence on that from the principals and the teachers.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** I am thinking particularly about in the Shoalhaven; it was effectively anecdotal and it was one-on-one communications with principals as opposed to there being a sort of overall framework.

**Dr GARDON:** Because it is not my area of responsibility I am not in a position to make comment on that. But what I can tell you is that in my experience, schools—and we provide additional support to schools from time to time for individual students—are looking very flexibly at their funding, about how they can support a wide range of students in their school. But I do not have that line of actual responsibility so I would not be able to make comment about the accountability.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Some parents are saying too flexibly and that is their concern.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** And it is a realistic and genuine concern. They are saying that the school may have a desperate need to fix a roof which is flooding three classrooms and that could be the most pressing need the school has and so resources that may otherwise have been intended for a learning and support teacher are directed to fixing the roof. The principal has that discretion under ESES and a good many parents are feeling that they are not getting their fair share of the inadequate funding.

**Dr GARDON:** Because it is not my area of responsibility, it would be inappropriate for me to comment on that.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** I might just ask one more question on the training and I promise this is the last one. The legal standards training has been rolled out substantially and you have just said that you are going back to basics on that and having a look at continuing that push, which sounds appropriate. The other sorts of training in this area are not being taken up at all, the numbers are very low for how much the additional training about specific disabilities that are available—

**Dr GARDON:** Do you mean in the supported online training?

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** I believe that is right and that those numbers are really quite low. Do you have any views on that and on what can be done to improve that? It seems like a massive gap. We know what the law is but we are not doing the training on how to actually deal with these kids with specific disabilities in schools.

**Dr GARDON:** I am not sure about the actual numbers of people across Tamworth doing the supported online courses. They are rolled out continually so they are continually available to schools. We have just supported small school principals, we have provided funds for small school principals who are teaching principals, to actually undertake the latest on accommodations and adjustments.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Dr Gardon, could you maybe go back and look at the numbers?

**Dr GARDON:** Across Tamworth? I certainly can.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** And respond directly upon the numbers?

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** The numbers have been put in front of the Committee and I can assure you they are very low for these, compared to the significant roll-out of the legal standards. How valuable is that training? I am interested in the anecdotal information. Certainly take that question on notice but how crucial is this training to being able to tackle these problems?

**Dr GARDON:** Because it is supported online, it is not just left to one's own devices, it has extensive resources that go with it, extensive readings. They are a significant number of hours, so they are intensive courses and I think they are highly valuable.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Wilson Park is the only special needs school of its kind between Taree and the Queensland border. We were also told, I think there is a rule of thumb—

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** There was one at Ballina but it was not the Education Department.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** The only public one. We were also told that there is basically a rule of thumb that says it is really a 50 kilometre radius that it draws its population from because that is realistically an acceptable travel journey. So given that it is about 500 kilometres from Taree to the border and you have one school with a 100 kilometre diameter it strikes me, just on basic geography and maths, that there is a big gap there.

**Dr GARDON:** But there are support classes within mainstream schools and just between Evans Head and the border and out to the Casino-Kyogle area, there are 80 of those classes. My personal view is that the very positive thing about having support classes sitting in local mainstream schools is that children with disability go to school with the kids from their neighbourhood, they go to school with the kids next door and they build strong friendships. We know about the wellbeing component of friendship and the importance of connection and belonging. If they belong to their local community, they go to their local school and there is a support class in their local school that can meet their needs, I believe that benefits their wellbeing, rather than travelling 40 kilometres, where they go home in the afternoon and they have not spent the day with their cohort.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** Assume that implicit in my question was the assumption that, if at all possible and practical, the best option is to have a child supported in their local school. That would absolutely be the starting point. But I find it difficult to believe that there are not instances in that enormous geographical region that you cover, or even just from Taree to the border, that there are not cases where, in the best interests of the child—it may be a very small minority—they would greatly benefit from having the kind of facilities we saw at Wilson Park, but it is just not there.

**The Hon. DUNCAN GAY:** It is contradictory. If it only works supported in the local schools, why do you need Wilson Park? You have Wilson Park there that is doing a great job but Mr Shoebridge's question is, there must be other students who need a situation like Wilson Park.

**Dr GARDON:** And some of the support units in mainstream schools would have as many classes as Wilson Park currently does. So there are large support units in mainstream schools. Wilson Park, I believe, has just been refurbished as well, so it is state-of-the-art.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** But you said, I think, there are 80 support classes in the area from the Tweed, to Kyogle down to Evans Head.

**Dr GARDON:** Yes.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** That is 80 classes, but we heard earlier that there are 108 schools, just in that Tweed catchment area.

**Dr GARDON:** Many of those are very small schools.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** But still, just in the Tweed-Richmond area, we have 108 schools but in that bigger area, we only have 80 support classes. Those numbers as well do not seem to me to match particularly well need to capacity.

**Dr GARDON:** But there are many students with disability whose learning support needs are met very well within mainstream settings and within the mainstream classroom and parents do not seek, or they do not actually need, the supported setting of a much smaller class size.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** That brings us back to the training point. Do you think mainstream teachers have the skills and are getting the training that they need to deal with the broad spectrum of kids in their class, including those with special needs?

**Dr GARDON:** We can always do with more training.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** We had a, for me, quite distressing late submission that has come through from the Australian Association of Special Education which just said that the New South Wales Education Standards Authority [NESA] has informed that association that the stand-alone mandatory Special Education Unit is no longer required in pre-service teacher education programs. From your unquestionable experience since 1978, what do you make of that decision?

**Dr GARDON:** When I heard that earlier today, that was the first time I had heard that as well. There are two aspects to that. I cannot answer for NESA, I will take it on notice, but there is also the difference between learning in the university environment and experience and there is a massive amount of experience within our schools.

**Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE:** But it is a bloody good start, as I said earlier, is it not, to be trained before you get thrown in at the deep end in a classroom? It is a bloody good start.

**Dr GARDON:** Yes, it is.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** And surely this is a backward step, is it not? I mean, it seems hard to see it any other way.

**Dr GARDON:** I have taken the question on notice, I really cannot answer for NESA, I am sorry.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for coming to 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 you have taken on notice.

**Dr GARDON:** Thank you.

**(The witness withdrew)**

**(The Committee adjourned at 14:29)**