

Subject: Submission for Senate Enquiry in relation to education & kids with disabilities
Date: Sunday, 26 July 2015 5:50:22 PM

Dear Sir / Madam,

Hello, my name is Vanessa Comiskey and thank you for allowing me to participate in your enquiry by sending in my individual submission in regards to education and kids with disabilities.

I am a mother of three children, one of which has been diagnosed with high functioning Autism, specific learning difficulties, severe generalised anxiety disorder, ADHD (inattentive), sensory processing issues and other processing delays. On top of that my son now has a diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder due to his experiences in mainstream education.

It was because of our personal experiences I felt compelled to speak up and submit this in hope that it would help others not to have to endure what we have experienced within the mainstream education system.

My son is currently in his third year of distance education after we were left with very little choice but to take him out of mainstream education because things became all too much for him and my family.

From the day that my son started kindergarten right up until he was at the end of year five he was not sufficiently supported at school either within the classroom or the playground.

During our time in mainstream education my son suffered years of constant and horrendous bullying, discrimination, isolation, and sometimes even verbal and physical abuse at the hands of both teachers and peers.

It took me four whole years of red tape and waiting lists to even get my son a diagnosis of high functioning autism. I was then told that because he was high functioning and he didn't have any clear development or speech delay, he would not be entitled to very much individual funding or aide time at school despite him clearly needing it! At that stage my son was also already over the age limit to receive any early intervention funding and help that kids get when they are under the age of seven.

For years my son was put into the "too hard" basket by the schools and the department (and I say schools because we were almost onto our third school before I pulled him out of mainstream). Due to my sons intelligence score he did not qualify to go to any special school or into a support unit.

My sons life was made even worse when back in 2011 the funding criteria was yet again changed so that anyone who had a diagnosis of "Aspergers" (high functioning autism) was no longer going to be eligible for any individual funding help at all. Also to top it off further if a persons individual funding fell under about \$6,000 it was taken off them completely. Just with that change my son went from a meagre \$2,500 of individual funding a year to nothing!

This was a devastating blow to us, which was then compounded by the fact that my son was clearly struggling in the classroom as well as suffering badly within the playground and then was also having to endure the clear ignorance and bad attitudes of people in charge of the school.

I was left gutted and I felt defeated! My son started coming home every day in absolute meltdown mode and full of tears because he wasn't able to understand or keep up with the rest of the class and was being picked on like you would never believe inside the playground and classrooms.

I begun ringing the school almost on a daily basis by that stage and found myself attending regular meetings with the teachers and principals (there was always a change of principals) and the department of education representatives in the hope that something could be done. I was desperate and at a loss. I would even go so far as planting myself in the school front office to be seen to because people were not returning my calls and seemed like they were clearly avoiding me.

I was then told by the department that my son would have to go back to a paediatrician or a medical professional to get his diagnosis changed to state Autism Spectrum Disorder rather than "Aspergers" so he could then get some funding reallocated to him. After another lot of running around I was able to do that and my sons funding was still not reallocated back to him!

Out of utter frustration I demanded that the school submit a mental health funding application on behalf of my child and was granted a ONE OFF sum of about \$500. An absolute pittance! My son had been diagnosed with severe depression and anxiety by a paediatrician and by the school counsellor and this money was all they gave him to suffice while his mental health continued to deteriorate.

In the end my son was lucky to even get two hours worth of aide time a week and during a meeting that I requested take place, I got told by the stand in principal at the time, (in front of the department of education representatives) that I should be grateful that my son got any help because it was more than he was entitled too! and not one person blinked an eye at that comment.

On top of the bullying and funding dramas I just mentioned I also need to point out that the bad attitudes and complete ignorance of Autism and disabilities amongst the school

staff were absolutely disgusting! They may have had some training in disabilities but that did not once change any of their attitudes!

One of my big issues I also battled constantly with, was that my son was mostly blamed for a lot of the bullying incidences or told that he was "misinterpreting it" or he would find himself in trouble for trying to fight back when someone else had clearly started it!

This whole situation came to a head nearing the end of year five when I was trying to transition my son into another school that had the facilities to support my child in his learning before it got even worse.

I was told by a department representative that my son would never be allowed entry into the support unit at the school because he was too well behaved and didn't make any fuss at school. Yes you heard right, my son was well behaved and did the right thing all the time so therefore he was never going to be granted any assistance in his learning. I even had a principal go so far as to tell me "off the record" that I needed to work my son up before he got to the school gates in the hope that he would have a complete meltdown at school in front of everyone like he did at home daily, so that they could log the incident and put it toward the argument that he needed funding!

Anyway only a few days after I had that conversation about the support unit access at the other school, my son was so distraught and desperate for help that he started self harming and wanting to commit suicide rather than go back to school for another day. It was at that point that we were done!

After that I immediately contacted the department of education and demanded that my son be allowed into distance education so that he could have a fighting chance at an education free of the stress, bullying, excuses and crap we were all so sick of dealing with. We wanted off the funding roundabout once and for all!

At the eleventh hour and just because I had demanded that my son be released from mainstream education, a department of education representative rang me and offered my son a place in the support unit that was about to open up at the school he was currently attending that had created all the dramas in the first place! I refused because what parent their right mind would allow their child to go back to the same toxic environment that had caused nothing but issues with the very same teachers, principal and peers! So I gave up my studies, employment and any chance at an income or superannuation to educate my child because the system had clearly failed him in more than one way.

Not long after our experiences with the mainstream system I took the NSW Department of Education to the Australian Human Rights commission and all I can say is that the issue remains unresolved. I do have to add though I was seriously considering taking them to

court and even had lawyers willing to help me do it, but the system is clearly set up so that average Australians like myself cannot access the legal system due to the major financial risks involved.

Not once has anyone apologised to my son or my family for what has taken place!

My recommendations are as follows:-

- 1.) Every student with a disability should be entitled to individual funding help within the mainstream school system no matter what their disability is or how mild it may seem. It has to be needs based so that every child gets their personal needs met within school.
- 2.) More Aide teachers need to be employed in schools across the board in order to cover the genuine demand and need for students
- 3.) More support units need to be made readily available within the current public schools or the government should look at creating Autism specific schools in every region across Australia so that there are other options for those who cannot get into the units or other special schools. I would also recommend that the criteria be more flexible when it comes to allowing kids into these units.
- 4.) Teachers that are clearly not doing the right thing by students and go so far as to discriminate or bully students need to be sacked immediately and have new and more accepting teachers replace them.
- 5.) There should be an independent education panel created across Australia & in all regions where parents can take their complaints against the department, schools and the individual teachers to be heard and have that panel assess the issues and pass judgement as to how and when it should be addressed. This should be a free of charge service for low income earners and carers of course! This panel should be set up to help create change within the system and the schools and the department should be held accountable to them at all times!
- 6.) Kids that have to leave the mainstream education system should be given more support and other help in terms of resources and schooling purchases as parents like myself are often left with the financial impact of having to provide extras that we can't necessarily afford, because we have to give up employment.
- 7.) Bullying, isolation, harassment etc needs to be stamped out of the system completely by having ongoing compulsory education sessions within the schools where ALL teachers and students participate to teach tolerance and acceptance.
- 8.) Mental health professionals should be involved with all public schools and have a hands on role in order to help students with depression, anxiety etc. There should be a

partnership with organisations such as beyond blue & lifeline that are a great support in dealing with these issues plus they have a lot of resources at their finger tips.

9.) There needs to be a more transparency when it comes to funding allocation for students within schools and the funding criteria should not be so rigid in for Autism because it is a huge spectrum of differences and not every child can tick the same boxes. Autism severity changes from person to person and each person has their own unique traits and issues to contend with.

10.) Parents should be given an information pack at the beginning of kindergarten that lists all the relevant information they will need, including how to chase a diagnosis for your child should it be required, who qualifies for funding, who to contact if you need help on getting an assessment, who to complain to when the schools and the department don't do the right thing , where to turn to for local advocacy help and the phone numbers of organisations to call in case they need further information.

11.) The whole behaviour issue when it comes to funding allocation needs to be looked into as it is not good enough to have good kids go without help just because they are not making noise or having meltdowns at school like other kids and being disruptive. Funding should be available to everyone!

Thankyou for your time

Vanessa Comiskey