

Senate Standing Committees on Education and Employment

Current levels of access and attainment for students with disability in the school system, and the impact on students and families associated with inadequate levels of support

Thank you for accepting my submission to this inquiry. I would be happy to testify at a hearing if required.

I am the mother of a young adult with severe traumatic brain injury (acquired at 6 months in a pedestrian accident), and two younger children. I would like to relay some of our experiences regarding education and also describe how school should have been for my daughter and her siblings.

My daughter started her schooling at 3.5 years of age. I did not want her to start school so early but because I was still recovering from injuries and I had two younger children who were 2 and 1 respectively at the time I was assured that this was best for my daughter. Being young, naïve and ill-informed I allowed her to start school.

My daughter had been making steady inroads in her recovery prior to school, not giant leaps but certainly slow and steady progress. After starting school her progress faltered and then she began to go backwards. I was deeply concerned and made enquiries at the school of the teachers. They told me how hard they were working with my daughter and named lots of resources she had available at school. Some months down the track my worry was increasing. I found reason to call into the school and to the classroom on a number of occasions and each time discovered my daughter lying on a rug on the floor with nothing within reach of her and she was being paid no attention. On the third occasion this happened I withdrew my daughter from the school as we could do so much more at home than what school was doing.

When she was five years old I was approached by a friend and asked to consider placing my daughter in a specialist unit in a school for specific purposes, her daughter was to attend the unit and there needed to be sufficient numbers. I preferred my daughter to attend the local public school. I subsequently approached the local school to enrol my daughter. It was made abundantly clear to me that my daughter would not be welcome at the school and that should I push the point things could get difficult for my younger children when they needed to enrol.

My daughter attended the school for specific purposes in a unit that was designed for students with severe brain injury. Over time the unit accepted students with a wide variety of disabilities.

The school for specific purposes was about an hour's drive from our home and it took about two hours at each end of the day for the journey because of the number of children to be picked up and dropped off along the way.

This situation adversely affected all of my children.

My elder daughter wasted four hours a day in transport to and from school during a period of time that could have been used for therapy. She was essentially excluded from our local neighbourhood because other children in the neighbourhood did not get to meet her or get to know her at school.

My younger children were separated from their sister in the school system which caused a disjoint in their feelings for her and they were subjected to bullying based on their sister's disability.

The time frame that my daughter was due to be dropped home happened to make it impossible for my other children to attend any extracurricular activities such as dance, music or sports because I had to be home for the bus.

Had my daughter attended the same school as her siblings she would have had an opportunity to get to know other children. She could have experienced what it was like to be just one of the kids at school. The other children at the school would have experienced inclusion of people with disabilities and bullying of the younger children could have been avoided by a more inclusive and accepting culture in the school would have discouraged the bullying and would have encouraged acceptance, tolerance and inclusion. A great benefit to all.

I could have taken my daughter to school and collected her each day and so been more available to take her and her siblings to extracurricular activities.

It is my belief that all schools for specific purposes or 'special schools' should be closed and all children encouraged to attend their local school.

My daughter was never taught because she was seen as unteachable because she could not be tested. She has a communication disability and has difficulty in controlling her movements, however she can and does listen.

All these years later my daughter is still excluded from her own community because she was never included as a child at the most basic level of inclusion.

My recommendations for the education of children with disabilities are:

- 1) Equip all schools with the necessary resources and staff to teach all children in their local school.
- 2) Close all 'special schools'. Children with disabilities are no more 'special' than any other children. They do not have 'special needs'. Their needs are the same as every other child. Acceptance, inclusion, justice, and access to education.
- 3) Smaller classes in every class and in every school.
- 4) Make every school accessible to people with disabilities.
- 5) Incorporate physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech pathologists, nurses and music therapists in the staff at all schools.
- 6) Train all staff in inclusion and acceptance.

Thank you for reading my submission.

Kind Regards

Cheryl McDonnell