



Aspley East State School

Proud to be an Independent Public School

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ASPLEY EAST STATE SCHOOL

RESPONSE TO SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE SCHOOL SYSTEM FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY

Our names are Michael Ward (Principal) and Leanne Smith (Head of Support Services). We work at Aspley East State School in Brisbane where we have one of the largest primary school special education programs in a mainstream school in the Metropolitan Region. We would be very interested in making ourselves available at the Brisbane hearing for the Senate committee to provide more detailed first-hand information. Please find below some of the points we would like to make:

- *current levels of access and attainment for students with disability in the school system, and the impact of inadequate levels of support on students and families*

In recent years the proportion of students with a disability has increased significantly, as parents increasingly choose mainstream over special schools, and also due to increased diagnosis of disabilities such as ASD. The broader definition of disability under the National Disability Standards for Education has also highlighted the very high level of need within our school, beyond just those students with a disability recognised within the Queensland system. Our Queensland system, unlike some other states, does not recognise mental or emotional disturbance health related disabilities as a verified disability category for funding and staffing purposes. Queensland state schools do not have specialised facilities and programs within schools catering for the very complex and high impact needs of ASD children, as some other states have.

Many of our children with disabilities are required to be on Individual Curriculum Plans due to their variation from their peers with regard to learning levels. Implementing and teaching to these plans within a peer-based class placement is very difficult when limited support time is available. It is not unusual for a teacher to be responsible for at least two to five individual Curriculum Plans in addition to teaching the mainstream curriculum for the age appropriate level of the students in the classroom.

- *the social, economic and personal benefits of improving outcomes for students with disability at school and in further education and employment*

The pressures on our school as a result of such a high student needs loadings are significant and are having a high impact. We have noticed an increase in staff burnout, staff turnover and stress related issues. Due to the obvious need to put safety and health needs first, students with very high support needs require a very large allocation of support time (both teacher and teacher-aide) in order to simply have these most basic needs met, before learning needs are taken into consideration. This leaves very little support time for other students with disabilities. Challenges around managing very high needs students are exacerbated by poorly designed, old school facilities which serve only to increase the complexity of issues we need to manage.

Students who may be compliant but have extensive disability needs (eg students who are blind or have low vision) may not be having their disability specific needs met as effectively due to the large numbers of students with health, safety or behavioural needs. Thus, these students may not be reaching their academic potential, nor being adequately prepared for high school. Specialist staff used to be able to focus on areas of the expanded core curriculum with such students (eg. Braille reading, writing, maths and music, Orientation and Mobility, Daily Living Skills, Technology Training, Recreation Skills and so on) but now have such large caseloads of student with wide ranging disabilities that there is limited time to cater for this group of students.

We have undertaken extensive professional development and research with our staff around current international best practice in the field of inclusive education. From this, we have learnt many new strategies to assist in managing the complex needs of our students in a mainstream setting. It has become obvious from this, that we do not have the staffing resources to implement high impact best practices, such as co-teaching, to any significant degree. Nor do we have sufficient funding allocations to provide the level of high quality professional development recommended to us by international expert Dr. Loretta Giorcelli, with our whole staff team. In order to truly implement inclusion effectively, we need support to undertake significant restructuring and re-culturing and receive more targeted support from our government Department. We have pursued a significant effort around the inclusion agenda at Aspley East State School and are very proud of what we have achieved with limited resources. We can only marvel at what should be possible if we are appropriately resourced. Co-teaching, carried out properly, is a prime example of how additional funding does not increase exclusion, rather it makes both teachers in the classroom responsible for all of the students in the room. It provides a model for meeting the type of complex and varied learning needs that are now common in many classrooms.

- *what should be done to better support students with disability in our schools*

Teacher training, professional development, increased numbers of human resources and appropriate facilities need to improve to better support students, and school communities.

There is currently no incentive in Queensland for teachers to undertake additional training in disability studies. Teachers are currently expected to source courses (courses in some disability areas are only available in one training institution in the country), pay course costs and study in out of work hours. With teachers already suffering increased rates of burn out, such additional commitments are seen by them as unreasonable. Subsidy support and time off for study commitments should be offered if we are to encourage more trained personnel.

- *the impact on policies and the education practice of individual education sectors as a result of the More Support for Students with Disabilities program, and the impact of the cessation of this program in 2014 on schools and students*

The More Support for Students with Disabilities money has been used in Queensland to provide online and face to face Professional Development in specific disability related areas. This has been extremely valuable but teachers will need continued access to these courses. The funding has also been used to provide additional personnel eg. in upskilling staff in ICT for students with disabilities. Already some of these positions have been removed, so staff do not have access to these skilled personnel when they need them.

- *the progress of implementing the needs-based funding system as stated in the Australian Education Act*

There is little evidence of the implementation of this system. Queensland runs a fixed budget model for providing human resources for students with disabilities, rather than a growth based model. With south east Queensland being one of the fastest growing areas in Australia and, as mentioned above, the higher incidence of students with ASD, the fixed budget means less for schools each year.

- *the progress of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability and the findings, recommendations and outcomes from this process, and how this data will, or should, be used to develop a needs-based funding system for students with disability*

The Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability highlights the numbers of all students with disabilities within schools. This data is based on teacher judgement across broad category areas and will not be accurate enough to inform resourcing. It is not moderated so the variations between schools could be quite significant. It should not be used solely to develop a needs-based funding system for students with a disability but rather be used to inform and build awareness of the high incidence of students with disability in schools. It should also be noted that not every disability requires the same funding and that the NCCD does not show the recommendations for support required for each disability. Nor does the data reflect the needs of students with multiple disabilities. Further data collection should aim to identify the resourcing needs for disability specific areas including low incidence disabilities.

- *how possible changes as a result of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability will be informed by evidence-based best practice of inclusion of students with disability*

The Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability is not a record of best-practice. It is a record of what support is currently occurring across schools and is not derived from evidence-based research. The data collection process is based on school decision making and teacher judgement and the limited availability of resources and should therefore not inform best practice. Specific research and data collection is required across National and International forums to determine best practice of inclusion of students with disability.

- *any other related matters.*

Adequate personnel and facilities for working with students with ASD are needed in Queensland. Brisbane currently has 2 private providers in the area of Autism, who can come nowhere near addressing the community need. On approximately a weekly basis we talk with families from well outside our catchment who are desperate to find a suitable school for their primary aged child with ASD.

Meeting the expectations of parents, the needs of students and quite simply the right of every child to be treated with equity and dignity in their education journey is impossible under current resourcing levels, staff training qualifications and teacher workload demands. Many teachers and school staff support inclusive educational practices and want to do the right thing in this regard, but are limited, and sometimes misunderstood, when what they put in place is realistic for the resource and time available to them, but unrealistic in terms of meeting actual student needs.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you require clarification on any of the points we have made or if you would like us to appear in person.

Michael Ward
Principal

Leanne Smith
Head of Support Services