



AUSTRALIAN SENATE

**EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS
AND EDUCATION**

REFERENCES COMMITTEE

10 December 2002

Senator George Campbell
Chair
Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Senator Campbell

The subcommittee formed to deal with the inquiry into the education of students with disabilities has completed its report and has made unanimous recommendations.

We commend this report to the full committee.

Yours sincerely

Senator Kim Carr
Subcommittee Chair

Senator Lyn Allison

Report formally adopted by the
committee on 10 December 2002 for
tabling in the Senate.

Senator John Tierney

Senator George Campbell
Chair

Preface

This inquiry has highlighted problems and challenges facing not only those most immediately concerned with the education of people with disabilities, but governments and school systems concerned with the totality of education decision making. Reading the evidence to the inquiry, listening to witnesses and visiting schools gave the committee some insight into the anxieties and stress endured by parents in attempting to obtain the best educational outcomes for their children. A degree of frustration was evident in a substantial number of submissions from parents. Less well documented was evidence of teacher frustration from having to deal with a wide range of learning needs and, sometimes, manifestations of behaviour associated with disabilities which they may not be equipped to handle. Nonetheless, the committee received sufficient insight into classroom problems to suggest that dealing with the needs of students with disabilities contributed to increased stress among teachers.

This inquiry arises from two concerns the committee has about the effectiveness of Commonwealth programs affecting the teaching of students with disabilities in schools and in post-secondary education. The first concern is that children and their parents are not being given the support that they need in the education systems. Many parents are under a double disadvantage: having children with either multiple disabilities or coming from a socially disadvantaged background. This is a human rights issue of considerable significance. Social justice demands that students with disabilities should have equal access to education. Commonwealth, state and territory anti-discrimination legislation support this fundamental principle, yet there still appear to be marked disparities in the quality of educational opportunities offered to students with disabilities. The committee was disappointed with the failure of the nation's peak education body, the Ministerial Council for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) to finalise education standards at its July 2002 meeting. This is a failure at the national level to recognise the paramount issue of equity in the provision of services to those with disabilities.

The second concern of the committee arises from the first: whether Commonwealth funding is being effectively targeted at deficiencies in the provision of education programs for students with disabilities, at school and system levels, and in post-secondary education. There is unambiguous evidence of under-resourcing of programs aimed at bringing students with disabilities into the mainstream of learning; as well as funding inconsistencies between states. More significantly, there is evidence that under-resourcing reflects the wider problem of diminishing resources for the education of all people.

When the committee refers to resourcing, it intends this to mean not only to what is in the budget, but what is in the stock of human and social capital needed to secure good educational outcomes and happy and productive people with a sense of self-worth. Much evidence was received that the shortfall in the 'attitude' budget was indicative

of a problem more serious than a shortage of funds. This is the context in which the committee records its conclusions and makes its recommendations.

Any Senate inquiry will give particular attention to funding policy and financial arrangements. The Commonwealth does not run schools or universities, but there is a clear link in education funding through the *States Grants (Primary and Secondary Education Assistance) Act 2000* and the *Higher Education Funding Act 1988* from the Parliament to the recipients of Commonwealth funding. This committee has an interest in the use to which funds are put and the validity of evaluations of program outputs. It looks for indications that there is a transparent process through which recipients are able to account for the ways in which Commonwealth funds are spent.

The committee received many submissions from representative bodies in the non-government school sector about the problems of meeting the needs of a growing number of students with disabilities in the sector. Around 20 per cent of students with disabilities attend non-government schools. Given the extent of Commonwealth funding for this sector, the committee was surprised to find how little these students were supported. The committee accepts that funding disability education in all school sectors will continue to be problematic but argues that any review of funding arrangements for the non government sector must be considered in the context of the total resources already available to that sector.

Similarly, most submissions from the post-secondary school sector told of the financial difficulty of meeting the support needs of students with disabilities. When viewed against a context of diminishing public funding and a growing number of students with increasingly complex disabilities, this situation is unlikely to improve. Students with disabilities are under represented in post-secondary education and while evidence suggests that this sector has comprehensive systems and procedures in place to support these students, many continue to be disadvantaged by their disability. In part this results from students having to bear the financial costs of studying with a disability, with less likelihood of their being able to supplement their incomes from employment. Compounding the disadvantage is a general lack of awareness about inclusive teaching practices by teaching staff.

The committee heard evidence that the proportion of students with an identified disability is increasing, relative to the overall student population. Early diagnosis of physical and sensory disability and improved early medical intervention is making educational prospects easier for some. There are problems, however, in dealing with increased numbers of children suffering from autism and from various learning disabilities. School education authorities have been generally reluctant to define learning disabilities; with most states using the same remedial programs to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities as they use for a student who is having learning difficulties. For a student with a diagnosed learning disability this may be neither sufficient nor appropriate. The committee recognises the importance of reaching national agreement on the definition and assessment of learning disabilities, and for the purposes of this report defines a learning disability as a neurological impairment that is intrinsic to the individual and is life long. A person with a learning disability will have severe and prolonged difficulties in the acquisition and

development of expected literacy, numeracy and reasoning skills given at least average intelligence and in the absence of other causal factors. Few interest groups and individuals write submissions to parliamentary inquiries reporting that all is well with the policy under consideration, and recommending that it continue. The committee accepts that not all students and parents who share the burdens of coping with a disability, are adversely affected by current policy and practices. There are many dedicated, gifted and knowledgeable teachers offering excellent programs catering for students with a range of disabilities. The committee saw some of them in action. Nonetheless, although satisfied parents and students do not usually write submissions, neither do many, perhaps most, of those whose experiences are far less happy.

The evidence from many submissions and from witnesses who appeared before the committee gives the clear impression that quality education for students with disabilities is a scarce commodity in schools generally. A picture has emerged of students affected by disabilities taught in many cases by teachers unskilled or lacking confidence in their ability to involve them in the full curriculum, resulting in these students performing at less than their full capability, and being regarded as marginal participants in the activities of the school community. Evidence also indicates that there is a considerable level of unmet need, especially in the area of learning disabilities. The committee was told of exceptional schools, not to be included in this generalisation. A number of particular schools were commended for their achievements in regard to inclusion policies and successful educational outcomes. Well-informed witnesses left the committee with a strong impression that such schools are in a select minority.

The committee received much evidence of a serious and worsening skills shortage among teachers who increasingly find students with disabilities assigned to their classes. Teachers are not always prepared for this experience, and unskilled in methods which involve teaching across a wide spectrum of abilities, capabilities and disabilities. They are often unsure of dealing with the classroom dynamics that are affected by the presence of students with different disabilities, particularly in secondary schools. For the most part, trainee teachers receive insufficient exposure to the theory and practice of dealing with students with disabilities. Of much greater concern is the unlikelihood of most teachers already in service receiving adequate professional development in this area. This represents a sadly wasted opportunity to graft specialised knowledge and skills effectively onto general experience and confidence which develops as teachers settle into their profession.

The training deficit is exacerbated by the decline in the specialist knowledge base of the profession. Staff rationalisations over the past decade have reduced the number of specialists as it has been assumed that with inclusion policies now broadly accepted, classroom teachers will develop skills in areas that were once the domain of specialists. The closure of a number of special schools, a policy given broad support, has nonetheless resulted in an overall loss of expertise. The remaining specialists attached to schools are often as lonely and isolated as the students in whose interests they are working. There is now a serious shortage of specialists in areas of sensory disabilities as well as in autism and learning disabilities. As specialist education

training is regarded by universities as ‘demand driven’, there are fewer course options available to teachers who want to specialise, and a number of universities have ceased offering such courses entirely.

The training deficit needs to be urgently addressed, and an attitudinal change to professional development is long overdue. The report of this committee on the status of teachers, tabled in 1998, pointed to the institutional weaknesses in the programs now conducted, and the adverse effects of devolution of responsibility onto schools. The committee takes the view that effective professional development in the area of disabilities requires programs to be properly structured and sustained over a period of time, involving both theoretical material and active involvement in practical ‘best practice’ experiences. Quality professional development comes at a cost. If the outcomes of this training result in attitudinal change in regard to inclusive education, improved teaching methods and increased levels of pedagogical and technical skills, these costs will be justified.

This report includes a chapter on inclusive education because this policy is widely accepted as likely to lead to the most desirable learning outcome for students. Inclusive education also recognises the human rights and equal entitlements of those with disabilities and embraces certain social responsibilities and ethical goals which are supposed to be consistent with a polity such as Australia. There is considerable evidence that some of these responsibilities are proving to be onerous. The continuing MCEETYA wrangle over the education standards, and concerns about the largely untested scope of the definition of disability under the Disability Discrimination Act show that commitment to fiscal rectitude is taken more seriously than commitment to principle.

The committee notes criticism of schools and education authorities by parent groups about their alleged failure to take inclusion seriously. Some submissions have argued that the willingness of state education authorities to embrace inclusive education has as much to do with the opportunities it affords to make savings as it does to the educational and social principles that are supposed to underlie the change. The committee accepts that there is some basis for this assertion. Reported instances of insensitivity, lack of consultation and underestimation of a student’s learning ability by schools and principals have been noted in many submissions. A great deal of this failure on the part of schools can be attributed to education and training deficiencies. Attitudinal problems may also be partly explained by lack of training and to the normal pressures that face schools in a climate of financial stringency. Even the most enlightened and committed school principals have a limited ability to impose an ethos in a school which is too far in advance of community attitudes.

Parents of children with disabilities are naturally conscious of the needs of their children to be fully accepted into the social life of the school. The committee acknowledges the importance of this view, while agreeing the learning needs of students must be given priority. Inclusive education must continue to embrace a number of learning centre options, where required. A small minority of students will need varying levels of withdrawal from the mainstream classroom, depending on the nature of their condition, if their needs are to be properly met. From another angle, the

learning environment of all students must be safeguarded, both in regard to their physical safety and in regard to their ability to concentrate on their learning tasks. Schools are responsible for ensuring that these conditions are maintained.

This report is not intended to be comprehensive in covering the field of issues relevant to the teaching of students with disabilities. If there are omissions noted, it will be because few, if any submissions were received in regard to them. On the other hand, the committee regrets that it has not been able to give adequate attention to a number of issues of which it is aware, in the time it has had to report. One issue in particular; the transition from school to work, may warrant an inquiry of its own. The social justice outcomes for our school system require attention to the ability of schools and vocational training institutions to prepare students for work in particular, as well as life in general. Adjustment to the workforce begins in schools, and there is evidence that more focus needs to be put onto work as an outcome rather than a vague possibility that may follow.

The committee notes that state education and other school authorities have either made recent policy pronouncements on education for disabilities or are in the process of revising policy. The coincidence of this with MCEETYA's deliberations over standards provides the Commonwealth with an opportunity to initiate policy, leading to sustained improvement in the educational and lifetime prospects of students with disabilities. The committee believes that this would be best achieved through addressing the training and retraining of teachers and specialist staff, but also agrees that the Commonwealth must accept a level of financial responsibility for the implementation of the standards. Schools cannot transform their curriculum and their culture by ministerial or administrative fiat. There is a cost involved. The inclusion of students with disabilities in educational institutions and their transition to the wider community is also a learning process. Its success will depend almost entirely on an investment in knowledge and skills.

