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Mr. John Carter,  
Secretary,  
Senate Employment, Workplace Relation and Education References Committee,  
Australian Senate,  
Parliament House,  
Canberra ACT 2600  
Dear John,

**Re: Inquiry into the education of students with disabilities**

I write this submission as someone with a physical disability, which has confined me to a wheelchair since birth. Therefore, while not professionally qualified as a teacher, occupational therapist or the like, one feels more than adequate in commenting on education for the disabled. Indeed my own circumstance, is as a law student studying at the College of Law, in St Leonards.

My particular interest is in Terms of Reference (1) (vi) and (1) (viii), as well as (1) (b). The committee appears to have assumed that the integration of disabled students within the mainstream school system is necessarily a good thing. My own experience was that this was not true. I actually returned to the "special school system" after a brief period in mainstream education.

It was not physically possible for me to keep up with the rest of a class. Admittedly, my time in the school system (at least in primary education) dates back to the 1980s. However, I draw my experience to the attention of the Senate now, due to my growing frustration at the loss of resources in the special school system. This was brought home to me, when approximately three years ago, I was asked by my former school principal to speak to an officer of the New South Wales Department of Education. His role was to assess whether my former school should be closed and, amalgamated with another special school a few suburbs away.

Regrettably, despite my impassioned arguments and, those of the parent and teacher bodies, there was no way you could logically save Manly Warringah Special School. Enrolments had continued to fall over several years, as more and more parents opted for early integration into the mainstream school system, for their disabled children.

While parents are naturally at liberty to do this, if they choose to, it is my view that the policy of integration is based on some very questionable principles. Furthermore, I do not believe it has been thoroughly thought through, as the consequences which may emerge only after the end of school. Again, I draw on my own experience, to make several points. Firstly, you will recall that I said earlier, that it was not physically possible for me to keep up with the work of a standard classroom; limited hand function saw to that.

Returning to the special school system via Manly Warringah Special School, it was possible for me to undertake high school studies successfully. This was due in no small measure, to the lobbying of the Education Department undertaken by the principal, on my behalf. She succeeded in having the Department grant me a dispensation which allowed for completion of the Higher School Certificate over two years. This part-time study regime, as well as the support of my family, the school staff and, numerous volunteers who gave their time to act as amanuensis (scribe), helped me produce a Tertiary Entrance Ranking of 80.95%.

The support became critical in one year, when only days before a major Higher School Certificate examination, I developed a cyst on my leg. Medical advice was that I should go off to hospital, or at the very least, undergo a series of powerful antibiotics. Returning home, we quickly rang my principal, who then made urgent submissions to the Education Department about my medical condition and, the possibility of moving my imminent HSC examination to a hospital. In the end, this was not necessary and

I was able to attend school, with the school nurse entering the examination room at appointed times, to administer medication.

I was very fortunate to have school staff who were prepared to go to any lengths necessary, to ensure I had every educational opportunity possible. It was also beneficial to be part of a small school. Individual needs were addressed and everybody was very close; in many ways Manly Warringah was more like an extension of my family, rather than my school.

It was these sentiments which caused me to enter the public debate about the so-called Scarlett Finney case. In this instance, the Hills Grammar School was accused of discrimination against Ms Finney, on the basis of her spina bifida. I listened to media reports that indicated that the School was not really designed for somebody in a wheelchair. This was confirmed when reading a letter in *The Australian* of 23/7/99 from Leonie Coombes. A parent at the Hills Grammar School, she said in part:

"...The school is...built on a rugged bushland site with little or no cover between widely scattered buildings. The claim that this decision is a great victory for the disabled is nonsense. It was a defeat for commonsense because not all schools can meet the needs of all children..."

I concur entirely, which was why it pleased me that my own letter on the same subject should appear with that of Ms Coombes. It said:

"...The neglected issue in the Scarlett Finney case (Frankly, school should have given a damn about Scarlett, 22/7) is any consideration of the special education sector. As a law student and former delegate to the Constitutional Convention, I credit my education to a facility that not only catered for me academically, but had the nursing, occupational and physical therapy specialists to maintain my physical well-being as a person with cerebral palsy.

The same people argued before the Department of Education to have my Higher School Certificate matriculation staggered over two years, on account of physical constraints. As such, the formal processes of my education may have varied from the norm but the substance never did. All the units I studied were the same as those taken across NSW; now I reap the substantial success of solid primary and secondary instruction.

Some might argue my situation was disadvantaged because my education was not conducted at a so-called normal school. Such arguments give weight to form over substance. Schooling lasts for 12 years, but what it imparts affects the rest of your life. I had the best of both worlds thanks to a special school. Scarlett could have the same..."

I stand by those words as much today, as when I wrote them. Should my parents have been mistakenly convinced that integration in the normal/mainstream school system was the ultimate goal, my life today would be very grim. Physical limitations referred to earlier, would have made it likely that my academic progress was stymied at best, and non-existent at worst. Fortunately, the resources of a special school allowed me to exchange academic failure for academic success. This is something for which I continue to be grateful to both my parents and the staff of the "late" Manly Warringah School.

Given all that has been said, my principal recommendation to this Committee (and the Federal Government) is to reassess their funding and educational priorities. The thesis that integration of disabled students into the mainstream school system is a good idea has gone unchallenged for too long. As such, more funding (not less) should go to the special education sector. Indeed, many elements of it may need to be redeveloped. This does not mean that I am calling for redevelopment of my old school (though this idea would have my support).

What is being said, is that the special education sector should be given more consideration as a viable education option to the mainstream system. To the criticism that this would isolate disabled students, I say that nothing could be further from the truth. At my own school, there was a regular program of contact with other institutions, their pupils and teachers. There was never any sense of isolation, at least not that I perceived. Indeed my special education, while not leaving me isolated, certainly insulated me from many of the problems of adolescence. As stated, my school was more like an extended family. Thus, one never

had any interest in (or problems with) any of the usual scourges of youth. As my letter to *The Australian* said, I had the best of both worlds when it came to education.

This is why it seems so unfortunate that the policy of integration is taken as a given in this debate. It was not surprising therefore, that only a few days after my letter and that of Leonie Coombes were published, some reactionary disability lobbyists launched a counter-attack. Under the headline "Segregation of disabled no better than racism" they said:

"... Adam Johnston may have had a positive experience from segregated schooling (Letters, 23/7). Unfortunately, reviews of the literature in this field indicate that segregated education for children with disabilities provides, at best, no advantage over inclusive education.

Some reviews indicate that segregated education produces significant disadvantages academically and socially when compared with outcomes for children who are included. Despite this and in defiance of international trends of more than 20 years, education departments around Australia continue to build segregated schools and units and force children to attend.

We used to forcibly segregate girls, Aborigines and some other groups in education. This would now be unthinkable, but it still seems to be okay for children with a disability.

If parents wish to choose segregation, fine, but forcing others who do not agree is an issue of basic human rights.

Dr RL Jackson, Director, Centre for Disability Research and Development, Edith Cowan University, Joondalup, WA

Scarlett Finney's case of discrimination against The Hills Grammar School (22/7) highlights the deplorable state of education for kids with disability in NSW, which has the worst integration record of any State or Territory.

Segregation of kids with disability is an educational and moral wrong. Kids with disability thereby lose the opportunity to learn from, and to socialise with, a wide variety of people based on their personalities, interests and aspirations rather than on someone else's perception of their disability and difference. It also generally results in poor educational outcomes.

It is bad for kids without disability who thereby don't have the opportunity to learn, as an ordinary incident of growing up, about the diversity of our community, and about the importance of values such as fairness, equity and justice.

I appeal to The Hills Grammar School to accept the umpire's decision and to treat itself to the joy that flows from creating an educational environment in which all children can flourish.

Philip French, Executive Officer, People with Disabilities, Redfern, NSW..."

I refute all assertions made above by Dr Jackson and Mr French. This is not an issue of high moral moment. It is a question of practicalities and real life educational outcomes. In my view, Ms Coombes gave an adequate and appropriate answer for the Hills Grammar School; it was not adequately designed to meet Ms Finney's needs.

For my own part, I do not believe that any fair reading of my letter invites anyone to conclude that I was advocating segregation. I do not regard education within the special school system as a form of segregation. It is a practical recognition of the particular educational, physical or other needs of individual students. Furthermore, as I indicated earlier, even if some still assert that I was isolated by my educational experience, my reply is that I was actually "insulated" from many of the scourges of youth. This is a valuable advantage, whose legitimacy I am ready to defend against all comers.

Another recommendation one would make to the Committee is that it should call Mr French and Dr Jackson to give evidence. I would be fascinated to learn what "literature" Dr Jackson refers to so confidently.

They should also be closely quizzed on the ideology behind their advocacy of integration. I suspect that many parents are attracted (even if unwittingly and subconsciously) to the idea that if they place their disabled child in a mainstream school, the disability will miraculously disappear. Have the advocates bothered to think of the consequences of their advocacy?

Furthermore, have the same advocates bothered to think of the consequences on the children concerned? From my own experience, my time in the mainstream educational system was a period of great fear, tension and stress. At the time, I of course, did not know how to articulate all these various feelings. Nor do I blame anybody for the fact that my experience was not positive. I do though, remember that palpable feeling of relief when my family and I found Manly Warringah School. This was where I belonged.

Regrettably, leading advocates do not like to hear this message; it is not politically correct and, does not invoke the administrative/para-legal terms of access and equity. But quite frankly, no artificial standard of equity will ever satisfy me. I want the freedom of choice to choose the services and standards which are appropriate to me. Therefore, my choice of special education should be considered valid, not on the basis of its acceptability to the Human Rights Commission, but its acceptability to me. Other people should have the same choices that I have had, and not be made to feel inadequate, if they choose something which "advocates and self-styled leaders of the disability movement" reject.

The Commonwealth should bring its influence and finance to bear on the States to ensure that the special education sector gets a fair slice of the education dollar. It is also necessary to counter-balance the ideology of integration, possibly by the Commonwealth tying certain education grants to the special education sector and its development.

Yours sincerely,

A Johnston

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