

9 April 2002

Mr John Carter
Committee Secretary
The Senate Employment Workplace Relations
and Education References Committee
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Mr Carter

Re: Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities

I write concerning your Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities. I commend the Commonwealth and your Department for undertaking this Inquiry.

During the last six or seven years, I have had correspondence with the former Minister for Education, Dr David Kemp, as well as his State counterpart in Victoria on this matter. It is one of gravest need and has a high priority in terms of its urgency. I would like to make the following points in relation to your terms of reference.

- I note that you are including learning disabilities as one of the areas to be considered. This has traditionally been a very challenging area, as at various times definitions have been open to scrutiny and/or parental interpretation that have not necessarily been accurate and therefore increased the number of students who were applying for this type of support.

At Tintern Schools, since 1987, we have had practical programs in place which have been managed by psychologists. Speech pathologists and special education teachers have worked within these programs in order to assess students with clearly ascertainable learning disabilities. In the main these disabilities have related to speech and language acquisition and communication needs. It would seem that these are the most prevalent areas in terms of related disabilities. There may be additional factors related to comprehension and/or levels of intellectual ability, but we have demonstrated quite successfully the links to language learning and communication.

Once again I stress that this has been done with the proper use of available testing techniques and employing psychologists and speech pathologists to work with young people and most particularly staff and parents, during their educative process.

We have also found that this has been an effective way of determining the actual learning disability area from behaviour or other manifested student needs.

- When considering current policies and programs for students with disabilities and whether these programs are meeting the students' needs, there needs to be reference to the current Commonwealth list of fundable disabilities. These fundable disabilities all have a bearing on, and a relationship to, what is able to be established within a school sector. As Tintern Schools (Tintern Girls Grammar School and Southwood Boys Grammar School) is an independent school situation, we have found that the Commonwealth funding that we have received for individual students has gradually diminished in a very frightening manner since 1987. The work that we are able to do, dependent on Commonwealth money, would be severely limited unless the school through the moral and ethical considerations of its School Council undertook to support and maintain the programs that we run.

We have also very clearly selected the major area of disability, 'communications' and organised staff and staffing to manage this disability of greatest need. Other schools, within the State, Independent and Catholic sectors, have chosen to focus perhaps on the hearing impaired or the sight impaired or some other area that is definable.

As stated in my first 'dot' point, the areas of learning disabilities are the most challenging in terms of definition. In looking at the terms of reference under your point, 'Current Policies' there are a range of ways where particular learning disabilities can be accurately defined. This, however, needs to be done in conjunction with schools, where the real numbers within given populations can be accurately assessed. We have found in recent years that there has been a degree of concern in the way in which the defining of a disability and differentiation between different levels of handicap have been organised. We would be very pleased to talk with you about this in a very practical and factual way, with examples.

The accuracy with which student disability related needs are assessed, is an area that should not be difficult to organise, given the amount of excellent testing material available and the use of psychologists and speech pathologists, or other specifically related professionals and the understanding that a school community has of the needs.

The particular needs of students with disabilities from different socio-economic areas of our community also needs factual consideration and can be done with a degree of accuracy as well as understanding, by looking at cultural backgrounds in relation to the tests that are available.

Early-intervention programs are essential and the primary school is the focus. The secondary school is a huge challenge, socially and culturally and if we could work in a far greater way in our primary area we would do our young people, as well as our society and our teachers, a great service. However, many of the programs are available in the secondary rather than the primary area and the ascertainment process does not seem to take place as effectively in the primary area as is needed. The funding and support in both the Public and Private sectors is critical. I would make two points:

- The funding needs to be sufficient to really have long-term assistance for individuals and groups within schools.
 - The support needs to be given to teachers, families and students and needs to be done by experts in the field. I have in my above notes, mentioned psychologists and speech pathologists working in a specific area. This means that schools need to be able to employ people, other than teachers, to work within their education profession. It also means that teachers need to have the confidence to work with other professionals. I am not sure of the industrial implications of these needs.
- The question of mainstream students and students with disabilities will always be a contentious one. In terms of the disabilities that we cope with at Tintern and Southwood, it is all within the mainstream. There are, however, occasions when we look to specific learning environments such as Rossbourne House or Heatherwood for some of our students when they reach a stage where the mainstream efforts that we are able to provide are not really assisting their future development. Once again we can give you full details on the importance of knowing when to move to a specific environment.
 - We do our own training of teachers at Tintern and Southwood and we also do our own Professional Development. This means that we have to ensure that our resources from within the school are able to maintain the level we need to assist teachers understand the disability and know how to work with professionals through social and curriculum modification and assistance. This is an area of high importance.

Many of the costs could be defrayed if the Universities and Teacher Training Centres had the sorts of programs, where effective methods of communication via literacy were available, that related to the work of the neuro-psychological area and the linguistic development area. (Please refer to an excellent article in the Scientific American of March 2002, which summarises the damage that is done through many programs that are currently used in our teacher training institutions in relation to literacy.) These programs alone would have a very powerful negative effect on exacerbating the possible learning difficulties of young people.

- I am not able to comment on the legal implications and resource demands of current Commonwealth, State and Territory legislation, but this should never be an impediment to the assistance of young people.
- In relation to the proper role of the Commonwealth and the States in supporting education of students with disabilities, it must be very obvious to many within our

leadership ranks that unless we provide sufficient capital for young people to be assisted through whatever specific handicaps or learning needs they have, as early as possible in their life and schooling, then we pay a huge price during their middle and upper-secondary years and their subsequent needs in society.

I am uncertain as to the detail of the proper role of the Commonwealth and the States, but whatever is organised needs to be centred on young people and their needs and also society and its collective need to have positive, active, fulfilled citizens. Once again I would be most happy to demonstrate to the members of the Committee the practical things that we do at Tintern and Southwood.

I look forward to the work of this Committee and hope to be involved.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. J. Walton', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Sylvia J Walton
Principal