

My name is Trent Wheeley. I am a Guidance Officer with Education Queensland, transferred this year to the Torres Strait. I am involved in the identification of students with disabilities across 12 of the districts 18 schools. Another 1.4 Gos service the others. I am also involved in the District Special Needs Committee and with Learning Support Providers.

I wish to respond to the terms of reference for your inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities. I will respond briefly to each of the 8 pointers. Where I'm expressing an opinion as opposed to a statement of fact I'll try to mention it.

- i.) As elsewhere in QLD we use six criteria for disability: Intellectual Impairment, Autistic Spectrum Disorder, Vision, Hearing, Physical and Speech Language. We also have a category for students with Learning Difficulties/Disabilities. For the Torres Strait population there is no formal recognition of two of our largest areas of difficulty, being Otitis Media and Foetal Alcohol Syndrome. We use statewide standards for diagnosing disability with a few variations for the indigenous population. The burden of proof for intellectual impairment is much greater here due to the perceived inappropriateness of standardised tests of intelligence for this community. This has resulted in a severe under-diagnosis of disability (0.75% vs. 2.45% statewide). A medical practitioner identified every identified Intellectually Impaired student across the district, prior to this year. The present Queensland system ranks disabled students from level 4-6. A level 6 student is one who needs an entirely modified school program. The formula used for calculating levels of support does not adequately reflect the real level of need of the student. A student who has an intellectual impairment and a totally separate classroom program but who is able to sit unattended and complete some tasks independently, and a student who needs constant attention, supervision and support, including feeding and toileting, would both be level six and entitled to the same level of support.
- ii) There are some problems here with regard to the assessment of students' level of disability related needs. There are prior issues with regard to the identification of students with disability. There has been an irregular service of screening for hearing and vision problems across this district. It is worse for some islands than for others. Irregular screening has meant long delays in the time required for students to be seen by an audiologist. We have had further cases this year where permanent hearing loss (sensorineural) has improved (inexplicably) and where the same student has received different results from the audiologist on the same day. For students with Learning Disabilities we have no staff across the entire district who are qualified Learning Support Teachers and no staff who are able to manage the statewide processes for assessing the support needed by these students. There are further problems in identifying appropriate levels of support brought about by the very protective environments present on some of the islands. Students, who would need much more support elsewhere, are supported here by their families and by close-knit communities. When we attempt to gauge their level of need this is hampered by the often invisible supports they receive.
- iii) Almost all of these students are Torres Strait Islanders. They meet all the criteria for this section of the feedback except for being from a rural area. Most of the problems I am discussing are because of these issues of race, ESL and remoteness. Fewer are due to poverty, although that may be a larger impacting force. ESL factors are a major issue especially in the identification of students with Language difficulties. A lack of appropriate testing instruments and of staff who are trained in analysing language usage has resulted in no students across the district being identified as having Speech/Language Disabilities. Remoteness is a large issue especially as students with disabilities reach high school age. There are only two high schools in the district and for students from the other 15 schools this means they will have to board on the mainland or on Thursday Island. Unfortunately there are no boarding facilities that cater for the special needs of students with disabilities. This has caused some parents to refuse to send their children to high school. Additional factors related to remoteness are the excessive cost of flying special education teachers to the students they are expected to be working with and the lack of medical services for the diagnosis of disability. We're yet to have a paediatrician visit this year.
- iv) There are early intervention programs available through one of the 16 primary schools in the district. That program is reported to be working very well and is helping with the

identification of a larger proportion of students. Early intervention is not available elsewhere throughout the district and some students with very severe disabilities are not being identified until they are eight or older. This year one student aged 15 has been identified as Intellectually Impaired for the first time. She has needed support since commencing school and will only now start to receive it.

- v) ? I have no idea what levels of funding support there are. I know of some public funds and no private sector funds that could be accessed.
- vi) There is only one special education unit in the entire district and it caters for the needs of three multiply impaired students at one school. Two of these three students are included in class as often as possible with a full-time teacher aide always with them. All the other disabled students are included in regular classrooms all the time. This is not a deliberate program but is a fact that arises from a lack of programming. In most of the district schools efforts are made by teachers to include these students as much as possible in regular programming. There are some schools and some students who are simply left to their own devices or actively excluded from classes. On one of the islands it was reported as common practice for several students with learning difficulties to be left outside the class, as their teacher had 'no time for slow learners.' However even where teachers and classes do welcome and attempt to include students with disabilities, in most instances there is a lack of functional support available. This is especially true of those students who need separate work to complete.
- vii) Teacher training and professional development is a big issue here. Generally speaking there are no teachers here who are formally qualified in special education or learning support. The sole exception is the recently arrived Advisory Visiting Teacher for Hearing Impairment. It is also generally true that these schools have larger budgets for professional development than many of their counterparts elsewhere in the state. I am unaware of what proportion of the PD funding is spent on special Ed. I expect it to be quite insignificant. There are additional factors relating to the training of indigenous teachers. Many of these have been trained through the RATEP program. Some of these teachers are excellent and cater well to the wide range of students in their classes, but those teachers would be in the minority. We also pick up a large number of first year teachers, who often have limited knowledge of and no experience with disability. This is one of the major factors affecting our low identification rate.
- viii) Legal implications??

That's all that's occurring to me at this time. Sorry I couldn't put more time into this,

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