

ST STEPHEN'S SCHOOL

Submission to Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee

Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities

Background

St Stephen's School is an Uniting Church, P-12, coeducational, low fee school. It is located in the northern suburbs of Perth on two campuses. The initial campus, which was established in 1984, has 344 primary students and 718 secondary students. The second campus, which was opened in 2001 and is growing rapidly, has 492 primary students and 212 Year 8 and 9 students. We anticipate our enrolments will be 2 500 by 2005, when our second campus has a full complement of secondary students from Years 8 – 12..

We have an excellent reputation for our Christian ethos, quality pastoral care and for the provision of a well-balanced education. This is reflected in our long waiting lists. We cannot meet demand for places despite the opening of our new campus. Our reputation is such that we are attracting more and more applications from students with disabilities¹. We are keen to enroll students with disabilities because it makes our school more representative of our local community. However, there are many issues involved as we accept students with disabilities into mainstream classes.

Access to and adequacy of funding and support in both public and private sectors

1. Currently we receive funding from AISWA for eight students with disabilities in our school. (We have more with disabilities for whom extra support would be valuable.) This year we received \$7 500 from AISWA for them – less than \$1 000 each. Such funding is inadequate.
2. Application for AISWA funds must be made every year. This and the accountability procedures at the end of the year are time consuming with no guarantee of the funds being received in subsequent years. Arguably, we spend as much money (in terms of time) preparing the paper work as we receive in CTP grants.
3. Moreover, application for AISWA funding for students with disabilities has to be made in the previous year when not all students needs are known. This occurs because students who are new to our school are not always enrolled before the application date falls. This may mean a student with a disability will have to attend for a year without any funding.

¹ The use of the term disabilities does not include students with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia, ADD, ADHD.

4. In the last two years we have received applications for places for children with a range of disabilities including autism, Down's Syndrome and muscular dystrophy. Each of these applicants has 0.8 aid in his/her current school. We explain to prospective parents that we do not receive the same level of funding for teacher aids as students with disabilities may receive in the government sector. Some parents withdraw their applications while others elect to continue with their enrolment application. We process their applications in the same manner as other enrolments in accordance with our Admissions Policy. Their disability is not a barrier to a place being offered to them.
5. Difficulties arise when they take up their position and want the same level of support they would receive in the government sector. Our fees are \$1 816 for a primary student and \$ 2 752 for a secondary student, so we are not in a position to provide the support we would like to. In the past, we have used parent volunteers to assist, but this has been difficult to sustain.
6. Similarly, it is very expensive for us to make the physical modifications to buildings or provide the specialist equipment, such as hoists and special furniture, required for some of these students.
7. Our dilemma is the more students with disabilities we accept, the more applications we are likely to attract. This places more demands on our resources.

Integration of students with disabilities into mainstream classes when there is inadequate support

1. Students with disabilities are being placed in normal size classes and expected to learn under the same conditions in which students without learning disabilities operate. The class sizes are far too large for their needs.
2. Class teachers are required to provide Independent Education Plans for these students in addition to the already huge requirements for the rest of their class. Many of these students with disabilities are not independent learners. They cannot be left to work on their own while the teacher moves around to other students.
3. These students are being placed in classes with teachers who are not trained in the learning disability area. This is a highly specialised field. Our teachers should not be expected to get this knowledge and expertise. Such an expectation devalues the specialist teacher who spends several years studying how to work with students with disabilities and accumulating resources and expertise. Mainstream teachers cannot hope to achieve this. The solution is for the class teacher to attend a day's course on the particular disability. Clearly this is inadequate.

The legal implications and resource demands of current legislation

1. If we do not offer a place to a student because he/she has a disability, we are discriminating against them. If we offer a place, which they accept, then potentially we are discriminating if we do not provide adequate resources to cater for their specific needs. However, the provision of such resources is often beyond our means.
2. We have a responsibility to the mainstream student and their parents, too. It may be argued that we are not adequately meeting the needs of the mainstream students because of the impact of the students with disabilities on the class. Some students with disabilities make huge demands on teacher's time. Currently everyone is missing out.

Conclusion

1. Parents of students with disabilities cannot exercise choice in the same way that other parents can because of the limited funds for support for students with disabilities enrolled in non-government schools.
2. Governments seem to be pulling back on their responsibility to adequately support students with disabilities. However, schools like ours must take these students and provide support otherwise we are seen as discriminating against them.
3. By accepting students with disabilities into mainstream classes we discriminate against the other students as the resources needed to cater for their needs are eroded.

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