

Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities

The following submission is a collaborative statement from Mater Dei Special School, Camden and the Good News Project, a program organised to provide social, emotional and spiritual support to young adults in the Macarthur Region of NSW.

The submission is the work of Sr Jeanie Heininger, a religious sister of the Good Samaritan Order, who is leading the Good News Project and Mr Frank Pitt CEO/Principal of Mater Dei. The points raised in the submission are the result of many years of interaction with people with disabilities and their families in both educational and community settings.

THANK YOU FOR OFFERING US THIS OPPORTUNITY

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TOWARDS AN ECOLOGY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES

Mater Dei is a highly respected special education centre including a K –12 school and weekly residential services for students with disabilities that aspires to develop programs that aim for an ecological balance of services. Programs encompass special education settings, early intervention, part-time inclusion, short-term intensive learning in a special school, return to part-time or full-time inclusion in regular schools and any other combination of service delivery which best suit the needs of the students and their families.

Just as the ecology of the land has its seasons and its interconnectedness with the changing climates, so too, the learning environments of students with disabilities need the interconnectedness of best practice in special school settings as well as best practice in regular school settings. Such an ecological approach demands new structures that develop this culture. New structures are desperately needed to develop this interconnectedness of services which could be a pointer towards a more comprehensive and humane service for all students.

The goal of balancing the best practice in both environments demands individually tailored programs coupled with adequately skilled teachers in all settings and the facility to increase and decrease a student's opportunities in each setting as the needs of the student change. In the special school this vision fosters a culture of moving the student closer and closer to inclusion into the mainstream. In the mainstream school, this vision fosters a culture of co-operation, sharing of expertise and short term or long term return to the special school. The emphasis in such a program must be the meeting of student needs rather than fitting students around funding criteria. An ecological understanding of the culture of special education is mutually advantageous to both educational settings.

Mater Dei is currently attempting to provide students with opportunities to access the best of both mainstream and special school services. The difficulties of doing so are immense. We are constantly steering a path between ensuring that adequate funding is available and providing a reasonable level of support, resources, education and encouragement to the mainstream reception schools that we are in partnership with. The involvement of parents is an essential component of this process. The complication is that for many families, their experience of mainstream education with a disabled child, is one of failure. This often makes the transitioning of students from a special school environment into a mainstream environment very difficult and can entail a lot of emotional support for families. It is in this area that I believe we should and must do our best work.

The burden on families with a disabled child is immense and, for many families, is life long. We must broaden our view of what education means, to encompass a vision that provides support and services to families from very early childhood through to adulthood and beyond. It is only in this way that we can claim to be providing high quality education for all

Inquiry into Special Education of Students with Disabilities

Inquire into the education of students with disabilities, including learning disabilities, throughout all levels and sectors of education, with particular reference to:

- (a) **Whether current policies and programs for students with disabilities are adequate to meet their needs, including, but not limited to:**
 - i) *The criteria used to define disability and to differentiate between levels of handicap,*

Response:

The issue of criteria for funding of students with special needs is one of the most contentious issues in both mainstream and special education settings and this has been the case for many years. The reason for this is that it is very difficult to assess the impact that a disability may have on a student's social, emotional and academic progress. Obviously students with greater levels of

disability will have the highest support needs and thus need a greater level of funding. However, the issues involved in this area are much more complex than simply aligning funding levels with a medical or psychological diagnosis or IQ score. Students with multiple disabilities are often disadvantaged using such measures, as are students who may not have a diagnosis, and yet are obviously in need of high levels of support.

The issue of behaviour management can also be a major consideration when planning resource levels for students with special needs. In many cases, as a result of a disability, the behaviours exhibited by a student can over-ride the disability and make education almost impossible. This is an area that needs further investigation and may require further resourcing.

ii) The accuracy with which students' disability related needs are being assessed,

Response:

The current assessment criterion appears quite narrow and equates a label with a certain level of support. This is clearly not the case as there are varying levels of support required within and between the various disabilities or IQ scale levels. Not all IM or IO students require the same ratios or the same levels of support. The needs of IM, IO or IS students do not correspond to any graduated scale. Students have individual needs, require individual assessment and benefit most from individual education programs. Great pressure is placed on learning organisations when they are required to tightly quantify the resource needs of students on the basis of their degree of disability rather than on their learning needs.

iii) The particular needs of students with disabilities from low socio-economic, non-English speaking and Indigenous backgrounds and from rural and remote areas.

Response:

The needs of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, non-English speaking and Indigenous backgrounds and those from remote and rural areas are far greater than families who are able to access services on a regular basis. The support services available to most families is at best inadequate to meet the needs of children with disabilities. Families with such backgrounds often struggle to provide an adequate social and learning environment for children with disabilities. The need for effective, home based early intervention

programs for isolated and disadvantaged families cannot be strongly enough emphasised, as this is the first step in the education process for children with disabilities. The programs required for remote and disadvantaged families should focus not only on the needs of the child, but also on the needs of the family, with the end goal being the provision of an enriched learning and social environment for all children with a disabilities. There is also a great need for associated support services to be made available to those in greatest need. Counselling services, therapy services and early education programs are generally quite inadequate, largely due to under resourcing and a lack of recognition of the great need in this area.

iv) The effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs,

Response:

Early intervention is the most important and effective strategy in providing support for families and children with disabilities. The opportunity for home-based intervention is most important, particularly for minority groups, as they have greatest difficulty in accessing community services. A co-ordinated approach involving home based therapy services, pre-school intervention and reception schools provides a seamless pathway for children and families to maximise learning potential.

The approach discussed is certainly the exception rather than the rule. Yet this approach is one that best supports children and their families, coordinates the efforts of specialist staff, and allows case managers to play a meaningful role in supporting families.

v) Access to and adequacy of funding and support in both the public and private sectors,

Response:

The level of funding provided for students with special needs is at best adequate, providing schools with the resources to cover teaching salaries and associated support. However, many of the services required to ensure success such as therapy services, counselling and family support are very poorly resourced. The level of funding, from a private school perspective, for meeting, therapy, social and emotional needs requires substantial fund raising on the part of the organization, or a deficit outcome on a yearly basis,

requiring support from religious orders or other benefactors. This makes forward planning or expansion of much needed services impossible. The needs are recognised, it is simply a case of not being able to resource programs at a sustainable level. The big losers of course are the families.

There is an increasing incidence of grandparents taking on the role of fulltime cares for students with disabilities. This places a tremendous burden on grand parents who are often unaware of the public support services available and who find it difficult to access respite services. This also creates problems with regard to long term care for children with disabilities. How long are grandparents expected to or are able to care for a young person with an intellectual disability? What support is available to elderly people who are often struggling financially to provide high quality care to children and young adults with a disability? What services are available to older carers who are living in remote or isolated communities, or who are members of one of the minority groups mentioned earlier? I believe the issues highlighted are causing huge problems currently and will continue to do so unless significant support is provided in this area.

v) *The nature, extent and funding of programs that provide for full or partial learning opportunities with mainstream students,*

Response:

The goal of all education programs should be to allow students the opportunity to fulfil their potential in all areas of development. For students with disabilities, this should involve an opportunity to join their mainstream peers in the regular school setting. Where a student's needs make this difficult, or such setting are not in the best interests of a student's learning needs, partial inclusion should be considered and a suitable model designed.

The difficulty arises in finding suitable placements in regular schools. Many regular schools are unable and in some cases unwilling to support students in an integrated setting. This is generally due to a lack of support. The mainstream teacher is often struggling to meet the needs of a class of mainstream students. The inclusion of one or two students with special needs into the regular setting can often place an intolerable burden on mainstream teachers who have had no training in the area and who are offered little support. The integration model is certainly the correct educational model, however, a much greater level of support is required if the integrated setting is to be one that is going to provide all students with successful outcomes.

In the independent, private school setting, we attempt to provide all students with an experience of mainstream schooling as part of their weekly program. We find this a very difficult program to maintain, as it requires our school to resource this inclusion through the provision of teaching assistants and the

transporting of our students to and from the mainstream school. Further issues also arise when we begin to transition students from the special school setting into the regular school. Funding for students is often a point of concern, as many regular schools cannot or are hesitant in transitioning students from special schools into their school, as they are required to resource the transition without financial support. This situation becomes even more problematic when we start to transition students between the private and public school sectors.

There is a need for integration funding to be much more available and much more fluid between systems. If we are to successfully transition students from specialist settings into a mainstream environment, we must structure such transitions for long-term success. Currently, this is not possible due to insufficient funding in this area.

vi) Teacher training and professional development,

Response:

The growing number of students with disabilities entering regular schools provides tremendous challenges and wonderful opportunities for teachers in the regular school setting. All teachers require a basic pre-service component of their degrees in special education. Without a basic understanding of the needs of students with disabilities, we are condemning students to failure in the mainstream setting.

A high proportion of students enrolled at Mater Dei are students who have encountered fail situations in mainstream schools. The reasons are two-fold. Firstly, the schools have generally been under resourced, providing little support for students and secondly, the teachers have had little or no experience or training in teaching students with special needs.

Mater Dei School at Camden is currently working in partnership with the Wollongong Diocese to provide in-service training to mainstream teachers in a special school setting. The teachers will spend a week at Mater Dei, working with teachers in the school, observing behaviour management programs in action, preparing IEP's and taking part in parent meetings to establish and agree upon goals and desired outcomes for students. We believe this may provide a model for training teachers who may be working with students with disabilities, yet who have no training or experience in this area.

vii) The legal implications and resource demands of current Commonwealth and state and territory legislation; and

b) What the proper role of the Commonwealth and states and territories should be in supporting the education of students with disabilities.

Response:

A society has no greater responsibility than to care for the vulnerable and those members who are in greatest need. Students with disabilities and their families are often the most vulnerable; economically, emotionally, and physically. Unfortunately the issues involved in the education of students with disabilities are very complex. This is because we cannot look upon education as being a fixed term issue for students with disabilities. Their need to access educational services often begins at birth and may continue through to old age. Students with disabilities do not enter the compulsory education system at five and exit at fifteen or sixteen. They require a life long commitment.

Students with disabilities often require cross-sectoral programs involving a number of agencies and this further complicates the issues. The families of students with disabilities may require an advocate to ensure that the rights of their child are being upheld. The capacity for parents with children who have a disability to work in full-time employment may be severely restricted and the economic demands related to medical and therapy requirements may be well beyond those of regular families.

How can the Commonwealth, state or territory governments respond to the issues raised?

Response to the above issues needs to be carried out with a great degree of compassion and sincerity to families living with children and young adults who have a disability. We need to refocus our energies away from the financial costs of education and focus on the needs of the individual and how best to meet these needs. Until we reach a stage where we can span educational boundaries and match students with appropriate education, therapy and social services, we will continue to struggle both financially and morally with this area. Perhaps the full service school model may be one that would best cater for students with disabilities and their families.

The full-service school could allow education and services to be located at a central location. This model would promote schools that could be used as centres of excellence for the education of teachers, counsellors and therapy

specialists. It could also be the launching pad for study into appropriate models for transition and inclusion of students into mainstream schools on a part time or full time basis.

CONCLUSION

This response to the Senate Inquiry into Special Education Services has been written from an ecological perspective. It is committed to offering places of connection for students with disabilities at each point of their maturation and learning. Every student needs a sense of belonging. That sense of not being separated out, of being part of a learning community and of being interconnected with a cross-section of other human beings is a fundamental need. New structures are desperately needed to develop this culture of interconnectedness which could be a pointer towards a more comprehensive and humane educational service for all students.

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