

# **INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF STUDENTS WITH A DISABILITY**

SUBMISSION BY Tim Bull

69 Harnham Drive, Bairnsdale 3875. Email: editorial@eastvicmedia.com.au

As chairman of Gippsland wide (in Victoria) lobby group, the Voice of Special Children (VOSC), I welcome this inquiry, which I hope will result in improved outcomes for special needs children in the education sector.

VOSC was formed to lobby for improved services for special needs children in a range of areas, however, we have found our organisation has become heavily involved with a range of education related issues. There are four specific topics in the terms of reference that I wish to address, those being:

## **Access to and adequacy of funding and support in both the public and private sector.**

VOSC has in the past 12 months been involved in several meetings on this exact issue with Federal Member for Gippsland and Federal Minister for Science, Mr Peter McGauran and State Leader of the National Party, Mr Peter Ryan, both who are our local Members and attend our regular meetings.

A number of parents in our group became disenchanted with what they perceived to be an enormous imbalance in the funding allocations for aides in public schools as compared to private schools. We had families wanting to school their special needs children in the Catholic and private school sectors, only to find the aide funding offered was not in the same “ball park” as was being offered in the public school system. In some cases the funding in the private sector was around a third of what was being offered by the public sector!. That did not provide these parents with any educational choice.

Although the following figures are estimates only, I use them as an example to highlight the inadequacies of the existing system. To school a “regular” student it costs (let’s say) \$6000 per year. At an independent school, government funding is received for around half of that amount and it is up to the parents to pay the other half in fees – around \$3,000 each. However, when a special needs child arrives and their aide is to cost \$15,000 to 25,000, a huge dilemma arises. How does the school pay for this? It is unfair to raise everyone’s school fees to meet the education requirements of one child, and to do so would put the fees out of reach of many families. So the parents of the special needs child are “offered” between \$3,000 and \$5000 in aide funding and told they must find the rest if they want to send their child to that school. However, at a public school the parents are offered far in excess of the private school offer. There is no question the parent of the special needs child does not have the same educational choices for their child as the parent of a regular child does.

As you would be aware, there are greatly differing funding systems for the various school structures, including the Catholic school system, Association of Independent Schools Victoria and the public school system. Parents have various reasons (including religious and cultural beliefs) for wanting to send their children to a specific school. However the current funding arrangements leave parents of special needs children without a choice as in many cases there is only one affordable option.

I believe a restructure of the funding system for special needs children is required to deliver a fair and equitable choice for parents. While we have (at least) three greatly varying structures in place (Catholic, private, public) it will impossible to provide parents and their children with an equitable educational choice. It seems quite clear that a system needs to be introduced where the funding follows the student rather than the school.

To elaborate, families would have their special needs child diagnosed and assessed (this will have already been done by the time they start school). Based on this, a decision on the level of aiding that child requires is made. Funds are allocated for that level of aiding and then a parental decision is made on which school best suits that child’s needs and that family’s beliefs.

I have found parents of special needs children are more than happy to pay the higher school fees of Catholic and private schools as compared to public - they just want a fair deal on the aiding assistance. It has been said that it is up to the other school systems to match the funding of the public school sector, but it is clear that in many cases they do not have the resources to achieve this. An overhaul is required that delivers the funding to the child depending on his/her disability and not the school system.

In conclusion, an across the board system uniquely for funding the education requirements of special needs children must be established that delivers equitable and fair outcomes for families, when deciding their child's schooling future.

### **The effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs.**

Having had my son diagnosed with autism and an intellectual disability, my wife and I put the grief behind us to try and help him as much as we could – as all parents do. The only thing we knew about autism was having seen *Rain Man*, but after finding out as much about autism as possible we were told by all that early intervention we were told was the key! We soon discovered the reputation of Irabina Early Intervention Centre and considered a move from Bairnsdale to Melbourne to access this fantastic service – “sorry there's a waiting list of 40” we were told.

We were advised Mansfield Travelling Teacher Service was the early intervention service that covered our area (Gippsland), but where as Irabina provided 2-3 sessions for each child per week, Mansfield's travelling teachers visited only once per term – hardly an acceptable level of early intervention. Despite even this, Mansfield had a waiting list of six months and, believe it or not, there was a waiting list to go on their waiting list. It became clear we had two problems, firstly not being able to access early intervention for our son at all, and then having to accept a service that appeared “second rate” as compared to Irabina.

Through the Department of Human Services office locally, we accessed occupational and speech therapy of one hour per week, which research indicates is no where near adequate levels. Our story is one that is familiar to the ever growing autism community in Victoria, where that state's early intervention programs are considered poorly funded, inadequate and in many cases inaccessible. It is a contradiction in terms to have a waiting list for early intervention

I met with then Community Services Minister, Christine Campbell, but it proved fruitless. She continued the line that funding had been increased and that she had no more money to allocate. At the same time Irabina was publicly stating it could “treat” all the students on its waiting list with more government funds – meanwhile the parents waited - and are still waiting with massive waiting lists existing.

What I could not seem to get through to Ms Campbell was that students at Irabina have developed to the stage where they have been able to attend regular schools, hold employment in the community and live independently. Treating these kids early does achieve results and in turn takes the pressure of the government of having to fund these people as adults who cannot care for themselves or function properly in the community. Taking autistics for example, the window of opportunity (ages 3-6) is considered crucial in their development. Not only will treatment then improve these kids to the best they can be, but in many cases they won't require assistance as “disabled” adults.

We eventually got access to Mansfield Travelling Teacher Service 14 months after enrolling. My son's window of opportunity is nearly closed. I am very angry he has not had the opportunity to develop to his full potential. Who is to blame?

You will excuse me for having a very low opinion of our state's early intervention programs. Not the programs themselves as such, but the lack of funding support and awareness of the important roles they play in the development of these children. They are not readily accessible when required and are therefore ineffective to the vast majority of parents of special needs children, particularly in rural areas where the quality of these programs falls a long way short of what is available in the city.

### **Teacher training and professional development**

Having had our son go through the kindergarten system and having started to look at the school system, we have found it difficult to access appropriate aides and teachers who have any knowledge of our son's disability.

I would like to suggest that as part of regular teacher training courses, the teaching and understanding of children with an intellectual disability be made part of that teacher training program. It would provide a great platform on which to build a greater understanding of the individual disabled children they encounter throughout their teaching careers.

**What is the proper role of the Commonwealth, States and Territories in supporting the education of students with disabilities.**

The proper role of all levels of government is to come together to provide greater assistance for families of special needs children in a range of areas, including access early intervention services and make schooling decision based on a fair system.

The strain on families of caring for these children is huge. I know of many marriages that have broken and individuals who have suffered break downs over the stress of caring for their disabled child – the last thing people need on top of their caring duties is to have to fight to achieve what they perceive is a fair deal.

I feel government needs to have a greater understanding of the needs of these children and their families and work more closely with members of the “special needs children community” to achieve better outcomes in a range of areas and ensure future generations of these families benefit from our efforts.