

SUBMISSION TO

**THE SENATE EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION
COMMITTEE**

IN RELATION TO

THE INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

The Association of Independent Schools of Tasmania (AIST) is a member of the National Council of independent Schools' Associations (NCISA). It is an Association comprising all but three (3) of the independent schools in Tasmania and also includes five (5) independent Catholic schools. This submission is written based upon the experiences of the schools and, in addition, the Association in its capacity as a Nominated Authority to administer Commonwealth Targetted Programmes on behalf of the Commonwealth Government for ALL schools in the independent sector in Tasmania. These Programmes include the Strategic Assistance for Improving Student Outcomes Programme (SAISO). The Association administers the Capital Grants Programme for the same sector on behalf of the Commonwealth Government. Unless otherwise stated, references below are to all non-Catholic schools in the independent sector.

Introduction

This Association has been involved in the development of the submission from NCISA, which we endorse. The facts presented by NCISA also underlie this submission and are not repeated. This submission gives a short Tasmanian perspective and emphasises certain points stated by NCISA. We are happy to clarify any issue but do not wish to appear before the Inquiry unless requested by the Committee.

Background

The independent schools in Tasmania have SES scores in the range 87 to 114. This is indicative of the socio-economic situation generally in the State. The policy in the schools is to include children with disabilities in the main stream of learning as far as is possible and to give special support through the school's own resources and the SAISO Programme. There is only one Special School (SES 70) in the sector that being Giant Steps for children suffering autism and this has a capacity for 15-20 students. Equal access to the school's curriculum and physical environment is an important principle for all schools in an environment of the parents' right of choice of school. Schools have careful

assessment processes in place to endeavour to ensure that the needs of students with disabilities are met. These processes involve the parents of the child and, where necessary, external expert advice.

Definition of Disabilities

The variation in actual definition of the level of disability and resulting financial assistance is a point of concern. It seems that the processes of diagnosis continue to improve and appear to be one reason why there is an increase in the number of children identified as having a disability(ies). This improvement in diagnosis could be used to determine some benchmarks acceptable nationally which would help authorities in all sectors define more equitable levels of disability and connected financial assistance. The other side of this, however, is that any assistance must meet the specific needs of the individual student and care would have to be taken to ensure that any benchmarks are not too prescriptive.

The student with a disability often has a learning difficulty as well. For example, his/her general level of literacy and numeracy could be lower than normal, which would affect learning in all parts of the curriculum. It is understood that this Inquiry concerns students with disabilities only and comments in this submission are restricted to such students. However, we believe that it is important to draw attention to the frequent connection between students with disabilities and students with learning difficulties. Yet at the same time, we recognise that the SAISO programme and other literacy/numeracy support programmes are in place to assist children with learning difficulties.

Capital Grants

The Disabilities Discrimination Act makes it unlawful for schools to discriminate against a person on the grounds of disability, except in those circumstances where the enrolment of a student with disabilities would impose an unjustifiable hardship on the school. One aspect of this is the provision of equal access for all students. Many of the buildings of schools in Tasmania are relatively old and the cost of alterations to give equal access can be very high. All new school buildings must take equal access into account at the initial design and erection stage which usually makes the cost reasonable or, in some cases, no extra cost. There are some limited funds available through the SAISO programme but these are for minor capital works only eg hand rails.

We are suggesting that targetted capital grants should be made available for unreasonable costs to the school associated with creating necessary equal access for specific cases only. These could have a minimum amount before applications would be considered and the existing Block Grant Authorities would be able to administer such a scheme.

Small School Difficulties

Within the State there are a number of small schools of enrolments 25 upwards. Comments from Principals indicate a level of concern about the effect of the number of students with disabilities applying for enrolment and being admitted. An increasing number of parents see a small school as giving more individual attention to their child - and this is usually the case. The Principals have a deep desire to assist these students but the concern lies in the effect on the school environment caused by an imbalance in the numbers. There is a real positive effect on the other students when they learn to relate to a student with a disability and this will normally stay with them for life. However, a

relatively large proportion of students with disabilities will change the school climate. This can be helped by an increase in the assistance available in such situations to provide teacher aides, expert advice, special curriculum aids, etc.

Professional Development

The inclusion policy for students with disabilities has created problems for teachers who have had little or no training in meeting the needs of these students. No doubt this has caused changes in the courses for new teachers in training and some professional development does occur through the activities of the SAISO Programme. One of the factors a school has to consider when discussing the enrolment of a student with disabilities is that of the staff being able to meet the needs of the child. It should be possible for a school in circumstances where the teacher does not have the specialised training required to obtain assistance for specific professional development by applying for a grant from a specifically targetted programme. This sort of assistance is beyond the capacity of the SAISO programme.

Rodney G.S.Tedds
Executive Director

28th. April 2002