



Network of Community Activities

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Submission to Inquiry into Education of Students with Disabilities

To;
The Secretary
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations
and Education References Committee
Suite S.61 Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Network is the Peak Body for groups involved with programs for children out of school hours. It is a membership organisation, with 700 member organisations in NSW, who are concerned with play, recreation, creative activities and care. Network is committed to the right of all children to equality and opportunities to participate in activities with their peers.

Network is not involved in formal education programs for children. However, we firmly believe that experiences through play are vital to the learning process and are essential to the Social, Physical, Intellectual, Creative and Emotional development of all children – we call this the SPICE of life.

Network provides resources, information, advice and training to Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) services in NSW. We also have as members community and parent groups who provide respite care and peer group support for children with disabilities. In 1994 Network researched and published a Discussion Paper *We Need Care Too – access for children with a disability to Out of School Hours Care*.

In our experience many children with disabilities are denied the opportunities afforded other children to assist their social interaction with peers, so essential in

middle childhood. Anecdotal evidence shows that children with a disability benefit from participating in these informal programs. They gain confidence and learn life skills not generally part of the more formal school curriculum. It has been reported that some children with disabilities can regress during school holidays if they are denied access to ongoing contact with their peers and stimulating activities.

There has been a great deal of emphasis within the education system for children to be included in the mainstream, and resources have been made available to assist with this process. However, funding and resources allocated to children with disabilities in their time outside formal school hours has been totally inadequate.

The Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services (DF&CS) provides some support through its Supplementary Services (SUPS) and through the Special Needs Subsidy Scheme (SNSS). However this does not adequately cater for the specific needs of school age children with a disability.

In commenting on the following terms of reference we would like to emphasise our conviction that in-school and out-of-school learning opportunities are vital for a child's development and should be equally available to all children..

1 (a)

i) criteria used to define disability and to differentiate between levels of handicap

Lack of definition means that some children with high support and personal care needs are unable to obtain the level of care or support they require. Others, such as children with extreme behaviour problems and those with ADHD, are not eligible for funding for additional support although their level of disability prevents them from being able to be accepted into OSHC services. In the school system these children may be in a special unit but ADD and ADHD is not generally recognised as a disability.

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

Children from low-income families may be disadvantaged particularly where there are mobility problems. Many children travel to school by subsidised and special transport. These services are discontinued during school vacations and there is no funding from DF&CS to cover these costs, although often essential for inclusion. Therefore some children are unable to access a vacation care services unless parents are able to afford the transport. This can exclude children from participating in excursions, which are important learning opportunities.

Lack of services or funding for service models appropriate to the needs children in rural and remote areas and Indigenous communities, means that these children do not have any service at all. In rural areas during the school vacations the schools are usually closed. Where a school age children's program does operate, the special resources and facilities of the school are frequently unavailable to the community. In some instances units for special needs children are locked and cannot be used by the vacation care program.

iv) the effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs.

We recognise this refers to early childhood programs. However we consider that OSHC and other out-of-school activity programs should be acknowledged as being preventative and play an important role early intervention of social problems. A high percentage of children in the Juvenile Justice system, as with gaol inmates, have an intellectual disability. Appropriate, and adequately funded and staffed programs for children and young people out of school hours could be an important factor in juvenile crime prevention.

vi) the nature, extent and funding of programs that provide for full or partial learning opportunities with mainstream students

The present level of funding from DF&CS is totally inadequate to meet the demand for children with disabilities to be accepted into Before/After School Care and Vacation Care.

The Special Needs Subsidy Scheme was introduced three (3) years ago. It was welcomed by the childcare sector as it targeted funding for additional staff support for children with special needs to participate in OSHC care as well as childcare providing early learning programs.

When the SNSS funding was announced, with \$30m nationally over 3 years, the Children's Services Sector considered the amount totally inadequate to meet the anticipated demand. This has proved to be correct. A notice from DF&CS (11/4/02) states that the funding is overspent and in future children will be placed on a waiting list and only accepted on the program when another child using SNSS leaves care.

This will effectively deny a large group of children access to early intervention programs and for school age children the opportunity to participate in play and recreation programs with their peers.

An unsatisfactory aspect of this funding is that it does not cover the full cost of even an untrained, inexperienced staff member. This means that either the centre has to pay the difference or the parents must be asked to meet the shortfall, further disadvantaging many children.

SNSS funding does not cover any transport costs. For school age children this is often essential. Facilities at OSHC centres are frequently inadequate, often lacking amenities such as accessible toilets, ramps and changing areas for personal care needs. There is no capital funding available to cover these costs.

There is almost a total lack of funding for programs for young adolescents with disabilities. It is inappropriate for them to spend their time out-of-school with young in programs for primary age children. However there is virtually no funding for them any programs are usually provided by a private charity. In order to leave the house during school vacations some young people with high support needs are taken out with groups from nursing homes which is totally inappropriate when they should be out enjoying activities with their peers. Parents are often left totally unsupported once the school closes and school vacations can be a desperate time for these parents.

vii)teacher training and professional development

Resources for professional development are always limited. network conducts In-service inclusion courses for staff in centres. However, this is limited by

funding. The complexity of conditions which many children attending centres have requires access to ongoing professional development.

viii) the legal implications and resource demands of current Commonwealth and state and territory legislation

There is considerable concern among service providers that they will contravene the Commonwealth Anti-discrimination Legislation if they are unable to accept children with disabilities due to lack of resources. There have been instances where parents have threatened legal action because their child cannot be enrolled. Where the Commonwealth supports and develops mainstream services, they should be available to all children and resources allocated accordingly in order to meet the requirements of legislation.

Judy Finlason
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