

**Response of Townsville City Council to the Australian Democrats Schools and
Disability Issues - Media Release 13 March 2002**
Inquiry for students with disabilities

The Australian Democrats have initiated an inquiry into the education of students with disabilities including those with learning disabilities, which follows the education committee's inquiry in 2001 on gifted children. The Senate has agreed for this inquiry to occur.

The inquiry is a welcome initiative and we look forward to the response and recommendations as a turning point for the inclusion of children with disabilities in the Education setting. Education is provided on a State by State basis, and therefore is inconsistent on a National level for all children, not only for children with disabilities. If a child has a disability, transferring from one state to another can be quite difficult for families and children. Australia has a transient population due to people moving for employment or other reasons.

The objective of the inquiry is to look at whether current policies and programs adequately address the needs of students with specific and multiple - learning disabilities, and the role of Commonwealth and State Governments in supporting the education of students with disabilities.

Townsville City Council for approximately twenty-five years has been involved in many ways with supporting the philosophy of inclusion and the rights of all citizens to be involved in their community. Presently Council sponsors a number of services that include people with disabilities into community life. In particular the Supplementary Services Program promotes and supports child care services to assist families and children with disabilities. This program has had significant success in assisting child care services to take responsibility for all children, including those with disabilities and high support needs. The Regional Schools Therapy Service facilitates the access and participation of children with disabilities into the mainstream education system. Both of these projects focus on the whole child and their learning environment, not just on their disability.

Townsville City Council would like to provide the following responses to the Terms of Reference for the inquiry for students with disabilities. This response considers mainly the Queensland Education system.

TERMS OF REFERENCES

The criteria used to define disability and to differentiate between levels of handicap & The accuracy with which students' disability - related needs are being assessed

Our main criticism of the criteria is that they operate from a deficit model which focuses on the child's disability, more than it does on the whole learning environment. Criteria used to define disability are different from state to state and between private and state school system. The criteria lack underlying principles and objectives as found in the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act, which states that programs and services should promote the participation of people with disabilities in the life of the local Community through maximum physical and social integration.

Education Queensland has recognised that the ascertainment criteria are rigid. Ascertainment is the process where by children are assessed on their levels of disability and their Educational needs. The process appears mainly to focus on the negative aspects of the child's ability. Children can not be ascertained without a diagnosis and/or a label. A diagnosis does not adequately address the child as a person and meet the needs of each individual child and having an ascertainment level does not guarantee adequate resources. Because support is tied to the ascertainment level of the child, children without a diagnosis may miss out on resources.

Literature from Education Queensland refers to access and participation within the learning environment, however this does not always translate into reality. Ascertainment reports are a useful document for planning, however the report needs to have balance between the negative and positive skills of a child. In terms of education it should focus on the educational needs at their local school.

We believe that all children have the right to education at their local school with their brothers and sisters. The principles and objectives of the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act are to include people with disabilities into their local community, and education standards should follow this approach. Therefore inclusion means children should be included into the regular local school and class with their peers.

It is pleasing to note that Education Queensland has recognised deficiencies and is reviewing the process of ascertainment to enhance their capacity to plan and meet the needs of students with a disability. (Education Queensland - Ascertainment Data Project and Special Education Project, www.education.qld.gov.au/students/special_education/sep/index.htm)

We recommend that the process for ascertainment focus on the whole student, their needs and the learning environment. Parents / Families should be encouraged to choose the learning environment best for their child's needs and in their local neighbourhood.

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

The ascertainment process and the class environment is not culturally appropriate for indigenous children. Teachers do not receive sufficient cross cultural training. There is a need to highlight the positive aspects of children's backgrounds whether disability, cultural background, social economic background and location.

The effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs

In Queensland there are two different types of early intervention programs provided by the Education Department. These are either provided in a segregated setting or with an inclusive approach.

Inclusive approach – Within the state schools we believe that the only children who are included have relatively low needs for support. Church and private schools have a better record of inclusion, partly because they don't have special schools or units.

Education Department provides a service that assists children below school age in all early childhood settings and in the home. Early Special Education Advisory teachers provide early childhood services with information about the child's disability and educational goals. However the development of these goals does not adequately involve early childhood personnel. Early Special Education Advisory teachers cover a large number of preschools and child care services over a large urban and rural district which reduces their effectiveness.

The Commonwealth Government also provides a Supplementary Service in Australia to assist child care staff with the inclusion of children with disabilities, this program is successful and works with services to meet their needs and the child's needs therefore meeting the whole needs of the child & family. Part of this program provides individualised funding to child care centres to cater for the needs of a child with a disability. To receive individualised funding a child care centre, parent and Supplementary worker provide an inclusion support from to the Commonwealth Government that looks at the child's needs within the centre environment, the form also address the amount of funding & resources required for successful inclusion. We believe this would be a good model to follow.

Segregated Services - Children with disabilities are clustered into an early intervention setting that only targets children with disabilities. Alternatively students attended a special education unit attached to a mainstream school and are integrated into the mainstream pre-schooling curriculum for some classes. This method of service delivery does not meet the needs of family or address the rights of children attending their local school in their local community with their brothers and sisters. This approach does not value all Australians as having the same rights.

We recommend an inclusive approach for early intervention.

Access to and adequacy of funding and support in both the public and private sectors and the nature, extent and funding of programs that provide for full or partial learning opportunities with mainstream students.

Funding to support students in both public and private sectors is limited. This is due to an increased number of students being referred to therapy services, but minimal increase in therapists or specialised teachers to skill, train and support other teachers to undertake an inclusion process that meets the student's needs. Funding and resources appear to be provided to students based on the child's ascertainment level. Some funded programs can only meet the needs of children ascertained as having a high level of disability, therefore funds and resources are limited to these students.

Teacher aide time assisting students with physical impairment is limited and then focuses only on assistance with toileting and feeding and therefore less time is available to assist students to meet educational goals. There are also limited funds to purchase technology and adaptive equipment. There has been an increase in the amount of time required to do administrative duties and no increase in funding to support this demand.

There are a number of services in Queensland funded to support children with disabilities, with many services established in urban or city areas with limited funding

to provide outreach services to rural and remote areas. There is limited coordination between services and this can be very daunting for teachers and parents. A child may be seeing therapists or specialised teachers (such as Advisory Visiting Teachers) with all services focusing on a totally different aspect of the child and their needs, therefore creating confusion as to what is the best approach for a child. In Townsville a group was formed to address the issues of coordination within the local area, however different funding guidelines proved to be a barrier to coordination.

Services provided in Queensland include:

Education Queensland

Hospital therapists

Private therapists

Services funded by Commonwealth Special Education - Non Schools

Therapy services located around Queensland

Low & Blind Vision

Outreach teams from Cerebral Palsy League, Montrose, and Spina Bifida association.

Teacher training and professional development

Within education Queensland, Advisory Visiting Teachers assist with the inclusion of children with disabilities. Its not clear whether the role of these people incorporate the training of mainstream teachers for example one to one training and small group training.

Teacher aides would benefit by professional development that looks at inclusion in the classroom and the whole needs of the child. Training and Professional Development should focus on how teachers and aides can work together for the whole class therefore supporting all children with varying abilities. There appears to be minimal coordination between services to provide professional development to staff.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we do not believe that the current policies and programs adequately address the needs of students with specific and multiple - learning disabilities, as most operate from a segregated approach, and are not consistent with the Commonwealth Disability Services Act. The role of Commonwealth and State Governments in supporting the education of students with disabilities should be strengthened and resourced to provide adequate support and inclusive education within neighbourhood schools, which is consistent between states and territories.

To emphasise the importance of inclusive education, we refer to the article Integration: *Coming from the outside*, published in Inclusion National, News and Views (National Council on Intellectual Disability) by Tim Loreman, Lecturer in Special Education Monash University. - *"One possible reason for the confusion that many teachers have between the terms 'inclusion' and 'integration' is that both models are attempting to achieve more or less the same goals. Each model is trying to prepare students with disabilities for life after school as participating and happy*

members of mainstream society. The main difference lies in the approach. Integration accepts that society will stay more or less the same and that students with disabilities need to adapt themselves to survive and lead a happy life within society. Inclusionists advocate for change in society, rather than in the individual. Inclusionists argue for change not only in attitudes but also in social institutions so that people with disabilities are recognised, valued and empowered. They shoot for an ideal which most will admit is a long way off. In the end it is the individual's ability to cope with society as well as society's ability to change to meet the needs of all its citizens equitably that may provide the compromise needed for full participation in society by people with disabilities".