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The Secretary
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee
Suite S1.61
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Secretary

Inquiry into the education of students with disabilities

Sutherland Shire Council supports the inquiry into the education of students with disabilities.

Council's role in relation to people with a disability is not direct service provision but a community development one. Through our Community Services Department we play a key role in providing support to organisations as they attempt to operate with and secure limited funding against the needs of their clients.

Many people with disabilities do not have the same opportunities and choices available to them as the community as a whole. In the field of education, opportunities, which are often taken, for granted by society as a whole, are often simply not available or accessible to people with disabilities.

Sutherland Shire Council provides several support services for children and students with additional needs and include;

- A support and resource service to all Commonwealth funded children's services within Sutherland Shire. This service is funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services
- Annual funding to Southern Sydney Therapy Centre to conduct a Vacation Care program for children with disabilities
- Funding to assist two Occasional Care Centres meet the special needs of children in situations of domestic violence (such children often exhibit challenging behaviours)

- Annual grants program. Under these programs, services for local children and young people are provided financial assistance in meeting the additional needs of clients with disabilities
- Purchase and installation of three Liberty Swings that provide the opportunity for education through play for people with disabilities

Important and valuable community services within Sutherland Local Government Area such as Noah's Ark Toy Library and Sutherland Shire Learning Difficulties Support Group (SSLDSG) are only able to remain operational as a result of funding provided by Sutherland Shire Council. **Neither of these organisations is eligible for funding under State or Commonwealth funding programs.**

SSLDSG offers a unique and well used service that crosses many government departments such as Health, Education and Welfare. Although SSLDSG has a current mailing list of 450 it is only able to continue providing much needed services through the financial support of Sutherland Shire Council. SSLDSG provides information and support to a diverse group of children and young people (and their families) whose learning difficulties stem from a range of factors. Additionally SSLDSG provides a valuable consultancy service through its resource library, forum and seminar series, which are utilised by service providers, teachers and parents.

Sutherland Shire Council recognises that the needs of children with learning difficulties and low to moderate support needs often receive a lower priority than children with diagnosed disabilities or those with higher support needs. Services such as SSLDSG specifically designed to assist such children continually struggle to secure funding from other spheres of government.

Noah's Ark Toy Library is a toy lending services specifically for children with disabilities that live within the Sutherland Shire. Membership of Noah's Ark Toy Library has grown to over 60 families with referrals from numerous government departments. In recent years Sutherland Shire Council has provided a number of one off grants in order for the service to maintain existing levels of provision to members. Council is now committed to recurrent funding of this valuable service.

Increased support and funding to organisations (such as the above) by the Commonwealth and states and territories is vital if they are to continue providing valuable educational services to children and students with disabilities.

Additionally identification of gaps in service provision and increased coordination amongst state services is required.

Yours faithfully

Amber Johnson
Community Worker - Projects and Disability

