

Senate Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities April 2002
Submission of the National Councils of Women Coalition Tasmania Inc.
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The Secretary
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee
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The Tasmanian Education Department states on its website (www.education.tas.gov.au) that it sees inclusive schools as cost-effective with international studies stating that additional costs of separatist settings are not justified. In a recent review of its Inclusion policy, the Tasmanian Education Department sent out a Community Consultation questionnaire which elicited the following views

Inclusion Policy: There was general community support for the policy on the grounds of social justice, but it was the method of implementing it which became an issue for debate. Human resources and funds are needed especially for specialist services such as speech pathology and physiotherapy.

Identification of needs should be collaborative with parents, the school and the district office. A major review of each child's progress at appropriate intervals, rather than annual submissions by parents, was recommended.

More support is needed for Category B students who have dyslexia, autism amongst other learning difficulties. Although these students do not fit into Category A, many of them have high support needs. Some respondents believe that a dual enrolment into both special schools and regular schools would be helpful. However they also felt that dual enrolment would need strict co-ordination to work properly. Parents wanted more information as to enrolment and other procedures such as Grievance. Integration had its difficulties and parents felt more resources were needed to improve it.

Disruptive behaviour happens when these students are not helped as needed.

Teachers: More pre-service training is required for teachers to equip them to work with disabled students. Although courses do include information on disabled students, most pre-service teaching does not offer any field work with disabled students. Teachers attempted to research the disabled student's disability but they found it difficult to access information about a particular disability. This made the teacher apprehensive about the challenge of having a disabled student in the

class. The management of all resources especially time was difficult. Timetabling was a problem, as other teachers had to take larger classes to allow the teacher with a

disabled student, extra time for his/her additional load. Many respondents questioned the educational outcomes for non-disabled students in the inclusion policy.

Teacher Aides: Responsibility must be clearly defined in job description and a clear lines of responsibility is needed between teachers and aides

* Safe playing areas especially fenced areas are needed as is adequate supervision in non-classroom time.

The Tasmanian Education department has published its Equity Standards on its website, stating that all education institutions "must pursue equity for all enrolled students, but it should especially focus on those groups of students who are known to gain significantly less from their education than the population as a whole. The Equity Standards Branch is responsible for ensuring all students have equitable access to the benefits of education irrespective of their sex culture, linguistic background, race, location, socio-economic background or disability."

This section of the Education Department is responsible for transport assistance and funding for information technology. It administers funding from the Commonwealth Targeted Programs and also for non-Government support programs. Services for disabled students are provided in accordance with "the principles and objectives of the Commonwealth Discrimination Act and the Tasmanian Disability Services Act." Hearing and vision-impaired students are supported centrally by means of the State support service, which manages the provision of services through State co-ordinators.

Buildings: As schools are upgraded through ongoing major works programs, appropriate access for people with disabilities is included in the plans of the Tasmanian Education Department, so that eventually all schools will have the capacity to enrol students with disabilities.

On its website, www.tafe.tas.edu.au, TAFE Tasmania states its policy to enable disabled students to access learning environments and to participate in training as fully as and as independently as possible. Their choices must be respected and

considered in the context of any specific needs. Almost 70% of students with significant disabilities are enrolled in regular schools, with the remaining students with disabilities being educated in Special schools. Some students with mild intellectual disability, low literacy and numeracy skills, less significant impairment and difficult behaviours are included within the broad scope of students with learning difficulties and they are for the most part, educated in regular schools. The number of students who fall into this broad range can be as high as 10-15% of the school population.

A Positive Case: Mrs Marilyn Toohey is very happy to share the story of her Down Syndrome son, Luke (15 years old) who has been integrated into the normal school system and is a happy child, working to capacity at school and able to show independence in many areas, such as catching buses to school unaided. Luke is Mrs Toohey's sixth child and at his birth, she was told he would be a vegetable all his life. She strove to get all the help she could to raise him and she extols the education and welfare system which has supported her and him. Luke is a Category A student and Mrs Toohey feels that they get a better support because they are more easily assessed, whereas Category B students have non-specific or less specific problems which govern their special needs. Luke started school at a State Primary School and entered the Catholic school system at High School level. In 2002, he is in Year 9 at St Virgil's [Boys] College. A recent issue of *The Standard* published "Every Child's Right to be Included" which ends with the statement that "The responsibilities for supporting the inclusion of children and young persons with Special Learning Needs must be a community partnership involving the Catholic Education Office, schools, parents, caregivers, children and young persons." Mrs Toohey stated that the Health Department and her own Doctor had been involved with Luke's care. She receives a small indexed pension as the main carer. She has had to apply each year for special assistance such as a teacher's aide. Mrs Toohey believes that it is good for normal children to learn to live with disabled students and to learn patience by stopping to help the disabled child. She also stated that Hobart College, a Senior State College, offers a program to include disabled students, with lifeskills seen as important. These promote the training needed by disabled students to become truly independent and live on their own. Mrs Toohey spoke of several success stories of the inclusion policy.

An Article by Alison Ribbon in *The Sunday Tasmanian* March 31, 2002

detailed the fact that there is a huge shortfall in the funding of the State Government's inclusion policy. Referring to disabled students, it stated that "funding had not kept up with the increasing number of these children. . . It is category B children who are missing out. Category B, now referred to as 'district funding' mostly covers children with disabilities such as mild autism, some hearing or sight impairment and attention deficit disorder (ADD). An example was given of a disabled student who had a teacher's aide assigned to him for 2 hours a week. "For the other 28, it is up to his teacher to look after him along with his classmates." Without sufficient funding for teacher aides, regular classes may be disrupted as in the case of the student referred to above who makes noises. Even Category A students who include some who are incontinent or immobile only qualified for the maximum of 27.5 hours' aide. The article stated that in 2002, 582 children in Tasmania are on the category A register. Of these, only 23 received the maximum aide last year and the average was 13.5 hours. Many sources researched, were concerned that the inclusion policy was in many cases impinging adversely on non-disabled students while not helping the disabled students.

Mrs Judy Carter [permission given to use her name] has had many roles in her career, having been a trained nurse, teacher aide and library technician as well as the administrator of the Dalton school which was purpose-built for disabled students and closing in 1994 due to specific problems with the building. There was access to physiotherapy at the Douglas Parker rehabilitation Centre in Newtown and speech therapy was also available.

Specially trained teachers taught disabled students in classes of ten with a teacher aide and specially prepared programs for each child. Mrs Carter believes that it is very hard for the disabled student not to feel on the outer as the only disabled student in a normal class. She gave the example of a student with a speech impediment who was put into a class learning Japanese and another student who had little motor co-ordination, who was put into a computer class. These were inappropriate placings which would benefit no-one, she said. Mrs Carter said that when the inclusion policy began, parents were promised that there would be no reduction of services. However she and other sources have all

stated that services dwindled as funds were reduced.

In its publication (November 1997) *Does Information Technology Improve Student Learning Outcomes?* information for Parents, the Tasmanian Education Department stated that "Students with disabilities have been helped by computers" (p5) and "Computers support the inclusion of disabilities into regular classrooms" also "Some programs may particularly help students who have difficulty learning." (p6) Their policy includes developing "our own research information about the effect that computers have." (p7)

From the limited amount of research possible in the time given to contribute to the Senate Inquiry, it is apparent that quality education of disabled students cannot be provided without the appropriate resources and funds. I have presented some views and also plans for the education of disabled students. Social assimilation of disabled students into the normal school community may work in theory, but in actual fact, resources are often taken from other children in the same class. An example of this, is that where a teacher has an aide to help with preparation of learning materials, that aide will have his/her time taken up with the disabled student whose needs are constant, especially if that student is physically as well as intellectually disabled. If disabled students were taught together for core subjects in the morning and then they joined the non-disabled students in the afternoon for creative arts or recreational subjects, there could be some socializing of these students. However where they are fully included in school classes, there needs to be more resources and funds allocated as the disabled student generally needs individual attention which is expensive. Teachers have so much heaped on them already, any inclusion policy must offer them more training and resources for them to achieve the best outcomes for the disabled students in their care. For the past two years there has been a shortfall in government funding of disabled students' education and requested support, despite \$21 million being spent annually. Tasmanian Education Department Deputy Secretary, Ms Alison Jacob, was quoted in *The Sunday Tasmanian* (31/03/02) as saying "I think our governments over the years have really taken this problem seriously and are always putting more money into it but there will always be children who could use more".