

QUEENSLAND CATHOLIC EDUCATION COMMISSION

SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Term of reference i) "the criteria used to define disability and to differentiate between levels of handicap,"

Traditionally Queensland has used a set of ascertainment criteria to define levels of educational need for students with disabilities. The three sectors; Catholic, Independent and Government, moderate the ascertainment across the three sectors to insure comparability. The range of ascertainment levels is from Level 1 (least need to modify curriculum programs) to Level 6 (most modification of curriculum programs). It is generally considered that Levels 4, 5 and 6 in Physical, Hearing and Visual disabilities as well as Levels 5 and 6 in all impairment categories fall into the Commonwealth framework of 'low incidence disability' – occurring at low incidence in the community. The group is therefore confined to Intellectual Impairment, Autistic Spectrum Disorders, Sensory Impairments (Hearing, Vision and Physical), Speech/Language Impairments and in the Catholic sector, Social/emotional Disorder.

Using these defining criteria, two difficulties arise. Firstly, chronic medical conditions (Epilepsy, ADD and ADDH for example) are not included. Perhaps in the short term, these students present with similar needs as do those who qualify for assistance under the existing definition. Secondly, 'handicap' is situationally specific. Procedures to assess handicapping conditions (those factors that are barriers to a student accessing the curriculum) are a feature of the ascertainment procedures used. Handicapping conditions such as physical inaccessibility for a student in a wheelchair, for example, can be alleviated with appropriate planning and resourcing. This tendency to 'label' through use of defining criteria sometimes fails to take account of real student needs, depending more on the label which defines their disability. The risk here is that students who do not fit the label, but who still have needs, go begging simply because they do not fit the label.

On a national basis there appears to be inconsistencies in diagnostic criteria used to identify students with special learning needs. Where states, Queensland for example, use a consistent set of stringent criteria and a set of moderation procedures across sectors to ensure comparability, the 'count' of students eligible for Commonwealth assistance under the Strategic Assistance for Improving Student

Outcomes (SAISO) Program is significantly lower than the 'count' in states using less stringent and unmoderated procedures.

Because of the inconsistencies mentioned above, there is the lack of an accurate and appropriate database on prevalence figures for students with special needs. This prevents adequate planning, both at the national and the state level.

Term of reference ii) “the accuracy with which students’ disability related needs are being assessed,”

Catholic education uses a range of procedures to assess student needs including Enrolment Support Procedures, Ascertainment Procedures, Transition Guidelines and Individual Education Planning. These procedures require demanding, significant resourcing including specialist personnel, teacher release, monitoring and tracking processes at central office and school level.

The assessment of the students' disability needs reflect a tendency to focus on the difficulties the student might experience in the teaching environment rather than on the child's difficulties which are inherent. In this way, all processes anticipate the dynamic between the student, the disability and the curriculum. The outcome of this dynamic is the degree to which the curriculum is modified to suit the specific needs of the student.

Accuracy of students' needs assessment in remote and rural areas is hampered somewhat by the lack of availability of professionals and insufficient funding to employ professionals, though the difficulty in employing professionals is not confined to non-metropolitan centres..

Term of reference iii) “the particular needs of students with disabilities from low socio-economic backgrounds, non-English speaking and indigenous backgrounds and from rural and remote areas,”

Currently there is little attention given to such compounding factors in planning for equity of access and outcomes for students with a disability. Identification can be clouded with assumptions made about a student having a disability when it can be a social or cultural factor causing the barrier to learning. As an example, indigenous students can be judged to have intellectual or speech/language disability when the cultural factor is the prominent feature.

Students with disabilities from remote and rural areas present additional challenges. If specialist staff (therapists, medical specialists etc) are available, their time is limited and the attention they can afford to apply to students is minimal. If they are not available, it is a costly exercise to transport them to the centres where the students live. The other alternative, occasional visits by the student to more populated centres, is disruptive and, quite frequently, an exercise of almost impossible logistics. As a consequence, these students do not receive the same quality and frequency of specialist attention that students in populated areas do.

Term of reference iv) “the effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs,”

Catholic schools generally, where possible, form partnerships with many government programs referred to as Special Education Development Units (SEDU's) for the most part, Queensland Catholic education does not operate intervention units. There is the difficulty of supporting the transition of students from the Government program to Catholic primary schools. There is often an expectation by parents and the community that the Catholic system provide early intervention programs. This may be realised as Queensland education moves to an extra year of schooling.

The current optional nature of pre-school education may contribute to the limited enrolments of disabled children in Catholic pre-schools in Queensland. Despite this, there is a widely held consensus with regard to the importance of early intervention to the future learning needs of disabled children. Current efforts are concentrated on preparing children for integration by increased participation in attached units which permits semi-integration. There is also the use of the early years diagnostic net in years one and two which both aids in the early intervention process and starts the ascertainment process in some cases.

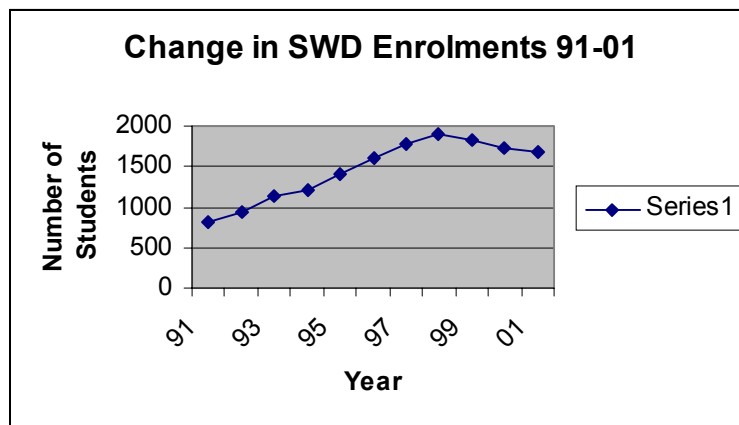
Term of reference v) “access to and adequacy of funding and support in both the public and private sectors,”

In recent years both the Commonwealth and Queensland State Governments have instituted various forms of legislation (Anti-discrimination Act, Disability Act) that make it imperative that Catholic education meet the expectations of community for inclusive schooling. Additional funding and additional support for students did not accompany the legislative initiatives. These legislative moves have had wide ranging impact on the capacity of schools to ready themselves for inclusion. The capital component alone, physically restructuring schools to meet all forms of student disability, is well beyond the capacity of school communities to meet. Capital funding has not increased to meet these demands. Classroom curriculum demands, the provision of resource teachers to cater for students with disabilities, are resource intensive. No forward planning to meet this additional resource demand in the form of additional funding has been forthcoming.

There has also been a reluctance by education systems to train classroom teachers in specialist areas. Teachers currently have limited training in their pre-service preparation. The inclusion of students in mainstream classrooms with, at best, teacher aide support is taking a negative toll on some teachers, causing stress and impacting negatively of the inclusion movement. The rights of students to access, participate in and achieve legitimate outcomes in their local school are acknowledged. However, the student's right must be balanced with responsible planning and resourcing. Without responsible resourcing, in our litigious society schooling authorities are currently subjected to litigation seeking redress for the denial of rights. Based on the current trend, this situation can only become more complex and unwieldy.

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

Catholic schools in Queensland have had a rich history of inclusive education of students with disabilities. As the chart below indicates, the enrolments of students with disabilities in Queensland Catholic schools has steadily increased from 1991 and has only leveled off in the last two years.



(Years are 1991 –2001 inclusive)

Hence, Catholic primary schools understand the issues, are very successful in dealing with the issues and have demonstrated honest intent and considerable success over the years. Secondary schools, more specifically Junior secondary, are challenged by the increased diversity of their student populations. Integration units and programs for alternative curriculum are more common in secondary settings. Post-compulsory levels are better equipped to manage significant diversity because of their more diverse vocational education options.

The expectation of the parents of students with disabilities is for authentic and achievable educational outcomes. This means that the inclusive issue is not just about access to the regular school. The welfare approach is inadequate if these expectations are to be met.

Some target areas are better equipped to manage disability because of the nature of the disability. Sensory impairments are clearer in the diagnosis so a specific response can be planned and implemented and resources estimated and committed. Other areas (Autism Spectrum disorder, Intellectual Impairments) are increasing in prevalence, are more difficult to diagnose and present particularly challenges in the planning and delivery of an educational response.

It is difficult to determine both the cost of integration and the extent to which the lack of financial resourcing limits inclusion. It is fair to say that estimates of the additional cost of educating a disabled student, on the average, in the inclusive setting are not as resource intensive as educating a disabled child in the special school. Most estimates place the cost of educating in the inclusive setting at over twice the cost of educating other primary school

children and at over three times to cost of educating the secondary school child. Commonwealth and State Government funding sources only partially (about 45%) meet these extra costs in Queensland Catholic schools. The additional costs are sourced from systemic budgets, meaning there is a smaller quantum of funds to meet the needs of other children. This is a vexing and frustrating issue in Queensland Catholic education as both the rights of ordinary students and those with disabilities can be undermined because of scarce resources.

Term of reference vii) “teacher training and professional development,”

Training of teachers by pre-service providers in the area of the education of children with disabilities, for both the classroom and the specialist teacher, has diminished in recent years. This has been accompanied by a resultant reduction in the expertise required to ensure achievable outcomes. Added to this has been a reduction in teacher training in pre-service programs. This puts extra pressure on systems to provide inservice training and renewal efforts to meet both the educational needs of students with disabilities and the legislative requirements. The administrative load and resource costs of providing in-service, school-based training, that training organised by the system, outside school hours when the demand is expressed, is excessively demanding.

An alternative proposal is the systematic individual tutoring of teachers by resource centres for the benefit of those teachers who are about to receive a child with special educational needs in their class. This would see an individualised program of training to meet the specific needs of a particular disability worked out in accordance with the requirements of the specific situation. If this process is implemented it must be supplemented by a drastic modification of pre-service training so the newly qualified teachers adopt a new approach toward all students and even to their work. Once teacher training is reformed, teacher practice is renewed and standard educational provision improves. Over a period of time there will be no more need for complementary or supplementary provision.

Term of reference viii) “the legal implications and resource demands of current Commonwealth and state and territory legislation;”

Legal demands mean education systems have expanding responsibilities in providing for students with a disability. There is an expectation of inclusive schooling, which, in turn, demands appropriate knowledge and commitment, broad expertise and demonstrated outcomes for students. Resourcing commitments have not accompanied legislative commitments and the current level of funding from both State and Commonwealth sources is insufficient to meet expanding responsibilities of educational systems. The funding system should be responsive to the changing needs of both teachers and students with disabilities. Legislative changes, affecting services, resources and costs have not been incorporated into the funding system yet the legislative changes have made more transparent the right of all children to inclusive education and the associated costs.

The responsibility for bearing the cost of the legislative imperative to inclusive education is uncertain. Whether the cost of provision is financed out of Commonwealth or State or even municipal budgets is immaterial to the student. It must also be recognised that responsibility for children with a disability is a social responsibility, and some of the educational needs of students with a disability might also be borne by the social security system. Currently there is little co-ordination between health authorities, social security services and education, either at Commonwealth, State or Local Authority level, each assuming responsibility under a limited set of understandings, seemingly historical and traditional, with no authority responsible for the overall common good of students with disabilities.

22 April 2002