

## The Tasmanian Council of State School Parents and Friends Associations Inc

150 Collins Street, Hobart, Tasmania, 7000  
Telephone: (03) 62237937 Facsimile: (03) 6223 7472  
Email: tcsspfa@tassie.net.au

### **Submission to the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities.**

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

Evidence submitted to The Tasmanian Council of State School Parents and Friends Associations Inc (Tas Council) indicates that the experience of parents is varied. Often, it is a case of needing to know the right questions to ask in order to find out information or penetrate educational and bureaucratic jargon, and for many parents this is a difficult, almost impossible, task.

In Tasmania funding of students with disabilities falls into 2 categories – Category “A” and Category “B”

Category “A” resources are administered by the Equity Standards Branch of the Department of Education and are allocated to students for whom functional and educational impact of their disability is lifelong and the most severe.

Category “B” funding allocated from the Special Education Resources budget, is administered by the State District Support Services, through the six Education Districts.

Of major concern is the number of children with special needs who do not receive any financial assistance. Overwhelmingly, parents argue that assistance provided to this marginalised group now saves society expense later.

Other students have conditions likely to affect their learning although not obvious, but sometimes controversial. These include

- ◆ students who are socially and emotionally disturbed;
- ◆ those with ADD/ADHD;
- ◆ students with an intellectual disability assessed at moderate to mild [50-70 IQ range];
- ◆ students with severe learning disabilities (including dyslexia); and
- ◆ students with autism spectrum disorder.

State based district funds may then be used to provide programs for this group, leaving less funds for other disadvantaged groups of students. While there is a tendency to blame this inadequate funding of non-Category “A” students on inclusion, and the increased number of included students in mainstream schools, this is clearly an issue of funding and inadequate resources generally.

ii) *the accuracy with which students' disability related needs are being assessed*

Anecdotal evidence indicates that physical access to buildings has at times been formally denied. In some instances, this has been because no teacher assistant was available. In others, physical access has been practically impossible. Despite advance warning, a child in a wheelchair went to a school to find the classroom was accessible only by stairs. Further evidence indicates physical access has been provided to a special unit in a senior secondary college, but not to other parts of the college such as the canteen and library, thus making participation in the whole of school life impossible. Simple planning, and adequate funding, should be sufficient to ensure physical access.

Access to all parts of school-life, not just the classroom, is an important issue. Sports days and excursions, suitable playground equipment, and access to technology are examples of restrictions on access.

Of particular concern is the limited access to speech pathologists, physiotherapists and occupational therapists. Access to programs such as the Speech Therapy Aide program appears to vary across Tasmania. Parents need to know how to access programs. A child can have had access to a consultant physiotherapist whilst attending an Early Intervention Centre, but find this is not available once the child starts kindergarten. If the disability is primarily intellectual, and not physical, the child does not have access to other government-run physiotherapy services. In such circumstances families have to pay for private physiotherapy for their child.

Therapists are a valuable and under-utilised resource and it has been suggested that a range of therapists be employed by the Department of Education. There is recognised difficulty in recruiting suitably qualified therapists to Tasmania, and suggestions have been made about improvements to salary and career path structures. Children with special needs have suffered from the critical shortage of speech pathologists in Tasmania. The Speech Therapy Aide program is very effective but depends upon full staffing of speech pathologists in order to operate. Speech pathologists cannot train in Tasmania, and must be brought in from interstate or overseas. Speech pathologists in the health sector have more attractive career paths than those in the education sector. School age children and adolescents are not able to access Health/Community Services speech pathologists, and there are very few private practitioners in the State. Students with high needs who are included in classrooms often go for long periods of time with no speech pathology service at all. This creates anxiety for their parents and teachers when students do not have the communication skills to access their programs or to participate in classroom activities.

For many children with special needs access to therapy services is vital to successful educational outcomes. The level of resourcing for therapy services should be increased.

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

An important issue for many parents of children with special needs is that of respite care. For some parents, school attendance of a child with special needs provides much-needed respite for the parent or care giver. This is a life-long issue for parents of children with special needs, and highlights the importance of consultation and close-working of all professionals involved in the care of the child. It is particularly an issue for parents and carers who have

resumed full-time care of children formerly placed in residential care. Some families have experienced considerable difficulty resuming full-time care of these children. The parents of special needs children, like all parents, have different levels of resilience that change over time and according to circumstance.

The ability to cope with the pressures of family life, particularly those with a child or children with special needs, is not linked to socio-economic status. Some parents, based on personal experience, believe that social trainers from the health sector who have completed a disability services course are able to offer valuable service to students. More than anything else, the respite issue highlights the complexity of life for those who care for a child with high special needs. It is too easy for educational bureaucrats to make assumptions about what is appropriate for an individual child or family, without a full understanding of the reality. Educational issues are inextricably linked with health issues, and close liaison between the two departments is essential.

It is a fact that the school attendance of a special needs child represents respite for the parent or care-giver. Sometimes children are sent to school when they are ill and would be better at home, but the parent needs respite. This highlights the need to involve the Department of Health and Human Services in providing appropriate support for the child, when for a variety of reasons, he or she is at home. The implications of this is clearly that the Health Department would need to become involved because at issue are such things as the mental health of the parent or care-giver, and the social needs of the family.

*iv) the effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs*

Tas Council acknowledges the commitment of its representatives to improving the educational outcomes of all children, and especially those with special needs.

Evidence gathered from parents and carers reflects a wide cross-section of views, positive and negative, about the education of students with disabilities. Overwhelmingly, evidence confirms that parents of children with special needs not only want the best possible educational opportunity for their children, but they also want a vital role in decision-making and, above all, their views to be respected and considered.

All parents argue for increased funding and improved access to therapy services. Parents are frustrated at having to constantly advocate for their children and battle bureaucracy in its various guises. Lack of information about programs, services and responsibilities, and the absence of appeal or grievance procedures compound this frustration.

Parents have a right to participate in decision-making about their children. Many parents feel powerless in the face of an educational bureaucracy which seems determined to adhere to policy, whether or not it is appropriate or reflects the wishes of parents. Some parents believe that they are not really listened to. Others believe that the realities of their lives are not taken into consideration. Parents want a real choice about placement and they want to be active partners in decision-making.

For many parents, dealing with educational bureaucracy is difficult, time-consuming and stressful. Parents are unsure of their role in such areas as case-conferences, the development and implementation of Individual Education Plans, and the funding process. Even learning the jargon is a daunting task.

Often isolated within school communities, parents find it difficult to access information. Many parents of special needs children depend heavily upon social support. Linked by a “fellowship of adversity,” they turn to other parents in similar situations for support, advice and encouragement. Some parents believe that, in a special school or facility, the “yellow pages” of advice – the accumulated wisdom represented by parents and housed within the institution – is much more readily accessed by parents.

v) *access to and adequacy of funding of programs that provide for full or partial learning opportunities with mainstream students*

Access to an educational program at an effective level is another matter, and sometimes extremely difficult where children with special needs have been included with their age peers.

Each year the amount requested by the State District Support Services from the central Fund for high level support is way above that allocated in the budget. Each year, State District Support Services are forced to compromise in order to find the shortfall in funds.

The negative aspects of the implementation of the Tasmanian Inclusion Policy derive almost solely from inadequacies in funding and access to resources. It is widely believed that inclusion is doomed to fail without adequate funding.

As the implementation of the policy currently stands, there is a strong link between the way severely disabled students and other students with special needs are funded. Because of the present funding structure the budget is stretched, and there are increased number of students being admitted to the Category “A” Register (those with obvious and severe disabilities), without increases in overall funding in real terms. Attempts to squeeze an increasing number of students into a dwindling budget has led to the running down of support services and an increasing neglect of the needs of children with less obvious disabilities. There is a widespread perception amongst parents that the amount of the budget determines the number of students who can receive assistance.

Parents have also noted with concern, the growing numbers of students with high needs who do not qualify for inclusion on the Category “A” Register and how this impacts on teaching and learning. Whenever there is a shortfall in Category “A” funding, one of the temptations is to take money from the Category B pool to top up Category “A” funds. The purpose of Category B funding is not to top up Category “A” shortfalls. It is allocated on a formula based on the number of students in each education district. The least populated districts are disadvantaged and, although there is some adjustment according to the socio-economic index, it is clear that the Category B funds do not adequately meet the demands of our schools.

The resource allocation should be determined by the needs of the child, not the amount of dollars available. Also the number of teacher aide hours allocated seems to be arbitrary and artificial, and it is not clear how the number is determined. There also seems to be a perception that the better the student performs, the less likely it is that they will receive an adequate number of aide hours. If a child develops a new skill at funding and testing time, they can ultimately be penalised in the next year’s allocation of aide time.

The failure to adequately resource support programs leads to a narrow and inflexible focus on the criteria being used to determine funding. A child acknowledged by program

managers and medical professionals as requiring physiotherapy and occupational therapy can be refused access to such services because they do not fit into any neat category. Without the right “label”, you don’t get services, irrespective of whether you need them. Children with global developmental can find it difficult to access services until such time as an intellectual disability with an appropriate “label” can be proved.

Tas Council is well aware of the often considerable time, energy and resources needed by teachers who have responsibility for special needs children. Tas Council also acknowledges that often it is not children with high special needs – the Category “A” children – who represent the greatest challenge to teachers’ personal resources. Often, it is those with significant behavioural and social problems who make the greatest demands on teacher time, attention and energy. Yet there is often little or no support for teachers in the management of these children.

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

**Tas Council recognises that many parents wish inclusion to be one of several educational options for their special needs children.**

To some degree, participation is dependent upon the age of the child and the degree of disability. Some children with special needs blend socially with their age peers more easily in the early childhood years, when the difference between chronological age and school performance is less. As the child moves through the school, and the difference in capabilities becomes more apparent, the social and educational benefits are considered by some parents to be less. There is little benefit to a high school age child with significant learning disabilities “cutting and pasting” in a corner while classmates write essays.

Urgent attention should be given to the expected increase of students with special needs coming from primary school to secondary school in the next few years. Preparation and planning beforehand are crucial. The development of flexible models is essential.

While there are many difficult issues associated with participation, particularly in the secondary years, there are many benefits of students with special needs attending their neighbourhood school. Inclusion can provide a child with the means to realise their potential, and to be a more positive contributor to society. There are also positive benefits for all children particularly with the development of tolerance and understanding, and an acceptance of diversity. Assistance provided to the special needs child in a mainstream school can provide material advantages for other children in the class.

There is a lack of resources to support the implementation of inclusion of special needs students mainstream schools in Tasmania. The shortfall in funding, and the uncertainty created by annual funding reviews are of great concern.

It may be possible to group children in schools in order to obtain maximum resource benefits: for example, by combining individual aide time allocations to produce the equivalent of a full-time aide. The age and degree of special need is an important factor in determining such groupings. There are resource benefits in grouping some children for some specialised teaching, such as life skills, particularly at upper secondary level.

Tas Council policy supports the suggestion that where a class has a child with special needs, the class size should be automatically reduced.

Tas Council recognises that, where resources are inadequate, attendance at the neighbourhood school of choice may restrict the access of students with special needs to greater expertise.

One of the greatest barriers to the success of inclusive education is attitudinal. Another is the lack of resources. Teachers need to be allowed the extra time that having a special needs child involves (planning, class conferencing, liaising with professionals). The answer to the problems many associate with inclusion lies in better and more efficient resourcing.

Teachers need to be aware of the difficulties faced by parents of children with special needs, of the emotional roller-coaster that, for many, is everyday life. Parents are often expected to be the expert on a child's disability as well as an advocate for their child. Yet many parents simply have their hands full getting through another day.

Parents are also acutely aware of the feeling, not usually expressed in their presence, that other children in the class may suffer because there is a special needs child in the classroom. It is rarely the special needs child that is disruptive but more likely to be those with behavioural problems which take up the teacher's time.

However, the special needs child may become the scapegoat for other problems in the classroom. It is a common misconception that a child with special needs, with a disability, is a child who has a behavioural management problem.

### ***Teacher aides in relation to the education of students with disabilities in regular classrooms***

Tas Council recognises the valuable role of teacher aides in the school system. Many parents believe that the success of the Inclusion Policy in Tasmania depends to a large extent on the teacher aide. The role of the teacher's aide in inclusion is an important and often underestimated one.

Parents of children with disabilities have expressed a need to be involved in the selection of teacher aides. A good working relationship between the teacher aide and the parent or carer is crucial. Home programs need reinforcement at school, and school programs need to be reinforced at home. If parents are not able to work with a particular aide, this can hinder the successful educational outcomes of their child. For example, one parent commented that she had been working extremely successfully with a particular home-based educational program in conjunction with non-departmental educational professionals. For maximum success, the school-based work needed to be consistent with the principles of the home-based program. The aide refused to work with this alternative program, believing that it was not appropriate for the child, and there was not sufficient support from the teacher or principal for the parent's wishes to be taken into consideration. There needs to be flexibility, and a clearly-stated procedure for the resolution of such differences.

Parents are often unsure of the differences in the role between the aide and the teacher. A clearly-defined position statement and "chain of command" would help overcome this uncertainty. A teacher aide can be responsible for a huge range of tasks including

- ◆ making and adapting working materials;

- ◆ classroom planning and working closely with the child during classroom activities; “translating” for the child, whose speech was unclear and limited;
- ◆ supervising toileting;
- ◆ supervising eating and drinking, and encouraging hand-washing and personal hygiene (including nose wiping);
- ◆ implementing physiotherapy and speech pathology programs.

The aide, however, is rarely included in case conferences, the development of the Individual Education Plan or annual funding review reports. It is also important that an aide is not seen as exclusively “belonging” to the child with special needs. This leads to the notion that if the aide is not at school, then the child should stay home. For example, a child in prep continued to finish at an early time each day, long after other prep children had begun full-time schooling because the school could only afford to employ the teacher’s aide until 2.00 pm. Some parents have “filled-in” as teacher’s aide so that their child could attend school while the aide attended professional development courses.

vii) *teacher training and professional development*

Whatever their level of competence, teachers are ultimately responsible for the educational programs in classes. It is essential that teachers liaise closely with teacher aides about their work with special needs students, and that appropriate time is made available for this consultation.

The regular classroom teacher has the rest of the students’ educational needs to address as well.

It is not enough simply to draw up an Individual Education Plan annually: there should also be an evaluation of goals and outcomes. Students would benefit from long-term planning, beyond the annual IEP. The Individual Education Plans depend upon the capacity of the teacher to implement the plans. This capacity may be reduced by inadequate training, and the availability of teacher aide time and other resources. Where the teacher’s experience, skills and knowledge of special needs students is limited, the challenge is enormous. Where funding of resources is inadequate, the challenge is all but impossible.

Teachers need a genuine commitment which includes the provision of adequate time for preparation and planning, including

- ◆ the development of IEPs (and the evaluation of them in terms of outcomes);
- ◆ the provision of adequate time for consulting with parents, professionals and teacher aides;
- ◆ the provision of continuing professional development.

The development of a workable mechanism for communication between parents and teachers is crucial. Many misunderstandings can be avoided or sorted out with good communication.

All teachers should have some knowledge and understanding of disability and equity issues and relevant educational practice. Furthermore, other students in the school respond better to the presence of special needs children if their concerns, anxieties, or questions are thoroughly addressed beforehand.

Tas Council recognises the expertise required to successfully educate children with special needs, and the added work load and/or stress which may be involved, particularly where the student/teacher ratio is high, and aide support and/or professional development are inadequate.

Tas Council also recognises that there have been significant changes in educational theory and practice since some teachers entered the profession. The educational needs of students with disabilities is just one area of change. Provided proper training and support is available, teachers should be encouraged to take on the challenges of educating special needs children partly for the personal rewards but also for the development of professional expertise gained in experiencing the broad spectrum of learning abilities.

However, Tas Council also recognises the value of specialist teachers and their contribution to the education of children with special needs, whether they are in a special school or mainstream setting. Their dedicated focus has helped them develop teaching skills appropriate for the special needs of many children. This should not be devalued and overlooked in the quest to deliver educational justice to all children. Not all teachers should be expected to have the particular expertise of special education teachers, but should be encouraged to learn from their compassion and their commitment to issues of equity and justice.

The practice of using teacher aides to teach special needs children seems to underplay the importance of the need for qualified and skilled teachers. This does not just apply to 'included' children. Many mainstream children with learning problems require appropriate diagnostic assessment and skilled teaching. Teacher aides should be employed to support, not replace, teachers. Unless specialist support staff is available in all schools, the pupil/teacher ratio should be reduced significantly.

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

The Commonwealth Government's Disability Discrimination Act 1992, sets out standards for education and the rights of students with disabilities, obligations of education providers and measures to enable access to enrolment for students with disabilities.

Government schools throughout Australia, do not have the right to refuse enrolment of any student. It can therefore be a strain on already stretched resources, if a school has to undertake refurbishment to cater for the needs of students with a disability.

Of sometimes greater impact of government school resources are the needs of students with less obvious disabilities and behavioural problems. These students are rarely accommodated by the non-government sector due to their restrictive enrolment practices.

In budgeting to meet the needs of students with disabilities and special needs, state and territory governments are constantly having to juggle with limited and insufficient resources. There is official data available to governments to indicate the numbers of students in need of additional resources to enable them to participate in meaningful educational programs. Special Education Funding should be indexed to ensure that programs can continue and be properly evaluated.



*(b) what the proper role of the Commonwealth and states and territories should be in supporting the education of students with disabilities*

Tas Council supports the continuation of Inclusive Education but only if the government adequately resources children with special needs in mainstream schools to ensure that no child is disadvantaged and all children are educated to their full potential.

Federal and State governments should ensure the employment of qualified Special Education teachers over and above normal staff complement. Special Education Teachers should be provided in all infant and primary schools to assist classroom teachers in identifying children with special needs and, in liaison with parents, developing individual programmes for them.

State Education Departments should ascertain the number of children with individual and special learning needs in all schools and accordingly staff schools with sufficient specialist teachers to meet their needs.

State Education Departments should liaise with the Ministers to ascertain the numbers of children with individual and special learning needs in all schools and once identified, the schools which these children attend, be staffed with sufficient specialists to meet those needs.

Tas Council supports Inclusive Education only if the government adequately resources children with special needs in mainstream schools to ensure that no child is disadvantaged and all children are educated to their full potential.

Where inclusion is being considered, the students' resource level should be maintained as a minimum for that student. Children with special needs must have those needs met and parents must be consulted regarding programmes for children with special needs. Special assistance to parents of children with special needs should be provided to enable them to help their children.

The Tasmanian Council of State School Parents and Friends Associations Policy recognises that the Tasmanian Department of Education Inclusion Policy is based on equity. It also recognises that parents want choice in the placement of children with special needs. Accordingly, a range of flexible educational settings should be maintained for the wide range of special needs represented in school-age children. Placement should be determined on a case by case basis in consultation with parents and professionals.

### **Recommendations:**

1. *That each child with special needs be assigned a case manager, from birth or the earliest possible time, to ensure that the present and future needs of the child and family are tracked, monitored, assessed and provided for within a holistic framework which takes account of specialised medical and paramedical, health, social, economic and educational factors. A case manager, in some cases, will need to be allocated for the life of the person with special needs.*
2. *That parents must be consulted about the placement of their children*
3. *That there must be a real choice about placement of students with special needs from a range of options, not just inclusion in mainstream schools*
4. *That all placement decisions concerning students with special needs should:*
  - ◆ *recognise the rights of parents to choose an appropriate education setting for their child*
  - ◆ *be made in consultation with parents with input from professionals*
  - ◆ *be based on an Individual Education Plan*
5. *That both Federal and State governments maintain and extend a full range of specialist services for children with special needs in a range of settings, with funding indexed annually.*
6. *That investigation be given to a method of ensuring consistency of services provided by State Support Services, and that parents be clearly informed which practices are local and which are State-based, and which are negotiable*
7. *That there be an independent Grievance or Appeal Procedure.*
8. *That methods of funding behaviour management be investigated*
9. *That it be recognised that children with high levels of special need come from families with differing resources: emotional, financial, physical and intellectual. The multi-dimensional social factors represented in special need should be addressed by both health and education sectors, working together*
10. *That general education training continue to include a component which explores inclusive education issues, including an understanding of the principles of equity, and the development and implementation of Individual Educational Plans; and That, where possible, general education training include practical experience in teaching students with special needs, as well methods for the implementation of Individual Educational Plans*
11. *That in-service training focussing on inclusive education issues and working towards an understanding of the principles of equity as well as attitudinal change be provided for all members of the teaching profession.*
12. *That the particular and significant role of specialist special education teachers be acknowledged and that their expertise, often gained over many years and at personal*

*expense, be recognised for its particular relevance and importance in the education of children with special needs: and*

*That the number of specialist special education teachers employed by the Education Departments be increased, by encouraging participation in postgraduate courses in special education and by making the status of special education teachers commensurate with their skills and expertise*

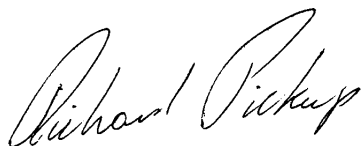
*13. That teachers of children with special needs have access to centrally-funded professional development on inclusive practices, policy and issues; information about specific disabilities and learning difficulties; the development and implementation of Individual Education plans; working with other professionals such as Support Service staff, speech pathologists, physiotherapists and occupational therapists; working with parents and carers; and aspects such as the use of information technology,*

*14. That there be on-going, adequate and relevant support for teachers and teacher aides: and that there be a staffing allocation for teachers and aides to participate in planning, case conferencing , evaluation and reporting*

*15. That teacher aides have access to, and be encouraged to participate in, nationally accredited credential-providing courses*

*16. That teacher aides working with children with special needs have access to centrally-funded professional development on: inclusive practices, policy and issues; information about specific disabilities and learning difficulties; the development and implementation of Individual Education plans; working with other professionals such as Support Service staff, speech pathologists, physiotherapist and occupational therapists; working with parents and carers; and other aspects such as the use of information technology.*

Yours sincerely



**Richard Pickup**  
**President**

---

*Sources of information for the Submission*

TCSSPFA Submission to the Inclusion Review (Tasmania) September 1999