

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

Inquiry for Students with Disabilities

Background

The National Health Medical Research Council 1997 Report states that approximately 2.3 to 6 % of the population experience Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder/Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) to a significant degree. The eminent researcher, DR Russell Barkley describes ADD as a disorder of the Executive Function thus organisation, impulse control and attention are effected significantly. While ADD may not be seen as a learning disability the characteristics of the condition do impact on the person's ability to learn within an academic and social environment. Furthermore more than half of children with ADD have an associated learning disability. Often this learning disability takes the form of an auditory processing deficit. Currently within Queensland, children with ADD and associated learning disabilities are not being catered for by the education system in any real and meaningful way. Families are left doing it tough and they report that providing an education for their children is one of the most harrowing experiences for both the parent and the child.

Terms of Reference

- 1) the criteria used to define disability and to differentiate between levels of handicap.

Under Commonwealth Anti Discrimination Legislation, ADD is seen as a disability. However under the Disability Services Act of Queensland the state government deems that ADD is not a disability. Thus ADD is not recognised formally by the departments of Education and Disability Services and families are not entitled to services.

Education Queensland states that a child may be entitled to services if that child has another disability e.g. Autism Spectrum Disorder. Most children with ADD are at least of average intelligence and while they may be severely disabled by ADD and a associated learning disability unless they rate at below average, less than 11.5% of the population they do not qualify. Thus some families feel that unless their child is intellectually disability they will not qualify for a service under the current Education Queensland policy. Children with ADD struggling at school are more likely to drop out and suffer low esteem due to their inability to fit in and perform to their potential within the current system.

- 2) the accuracy with which students disability related needs are being assessed.

Mothers of children with ADD report that more often than not they are the ones insisting on assessment of their child's needs. In general, teachers do not have a sound understanding of learning disabilities thus the parent must first have a good understanding of ADD and some understanding of associated learning disabilities in order to assist their child. Currently Education Queensland believes that Appraisalment and Ascertainment are suitable tools to identify children in need of specialist services. This has not been the experience of many families affected by ADD.

- 3) the particular needs of students with disabilities from low socio-economic, non-English speaking and indigenous backgrounds and from rural and remote areas.

Usually it is the well educated mothers who are more successful in obtaining recognition of their child's needs and in providing assistance. Rural, remote and regional Queensland suffer from lack of expertise in many health areas. North Queensland Child and Youth Mental Health Services has the only child psychiatrist outside of the SouthEast Corner. Townsville, a large regional centre does not have an audiologist thus while many children with ADD do have auditory processing deficits this assessment is not available. If assessment is obtained the required service is not usually available through the public system.

- iv) the effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs.

There are no early intervention programs for children with ADD and associated learning disabilities. Mothers and support groups have been advocating for early intervention programs as these programs have the potential to curb the drop out rate and underachievement of children within the Education system. As previously stated, parents have had to fight every inch of the way to have their children assessed and advocated strongly to have access to programs which may assist their children. Often current programs do not meet the needs of children with ADD.

- v) access to and adequacy of funding and support in both public and private sectors.

As previously stated there is little support within the education system whether it is private or public for children with ADD and associated learning disabilities. It appears that children, who are being currently catered for e.g., children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder are not assured of regular and adequate services due to funding shortages.

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

Children with ADD are usually within the mainstream system however the current system fails these children and they are considered at risk. The current system disadvantages children who do not respond well to an auditory style of teaching. There needs to be flexibility within the system to allow for children who respond to visual and hands on styles of teaching.

- vii) teacher training and professional development.

Teachers have a difficult task as they are under resourced. Teachers, even the best ones can not be expected to know everything about all disabilities however they should have access to specialist knowledge and specialist tutors to assist them in the classroom. The current system, which provides for Advisory Teachers and counsellors, is failing our children miserably.

Some teachers and counsellors believe that it is appropriate to state that “they do not believe in ADD”. Many mothers report very negative experiences when dealing with teachers concerning their child’s ADD and or learning disability. Many professionals blame the mothers of children with ADD and almost everyone has an opinion on ADD, even though they will tell you they do not know much about it.

Teachers need information to dispel the myths surrounding ADD and associated learning disabilities and they need resources to assist them in the classroom.

- viii) The legal implications and resource demands of current Commonwealth and state and territory legislation.

Resources will always be an issue however if Queensland is truly to succeed in becoming a ‘Smart State’ and if our social justice issues are to be addressed more funding needs to be channeled into the classroom and into specialist services.

ADD is a complex issue and the response from government and the community so far has been to ignore it with the hope that it will go away. However the reality is that ADD will not go away and the future success of our children and nation depend on the government’s and the communities’ ability to respond in a sensitive and informed manner.

Individuals and support groups for some time have been trying to engage government to seriously look at the issues of ADD and associated co-morbidities and to provide assistance to families. Given the discrimination and neglect that families and children with ADD and associated co-morbidities suffer it may be only a matter of time before the current differences in the Commonwealth and state legislation be used to bring this issue to the forefront.

The support group has had a short period of time to respond to this inquiry and we would welcome the opportunity to meet with the senate committee or to speak with them by phone. We will be sending copies of our response to our network of support groups and other organisations interested in the issues of ADD. These contacts are in rural and regional Queensland e.g. Rockhampton and Charleville and in the South East Corner e.g. Brisbane, Ipswich and Toowoomba. We hope that you may consider consulting with these groups on this issue.

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