



**Federation of Parents and Friends
Associations of Catholic Schools in
South Australia Inc**

Contact: Prue Madsen

PO Box 179 Torrensville Plaza, South Australia. 5031

Phone: 8301 6657

Email: prue.madsen@ceo.adl.catholic.edu.au

**Submission to the Senate Inquiry on the
Education of Children with Disabilities**

April, 2002

Federation of Parents and Friends Associations of South Australian Catholic Schools Inc

Inquiry into the education of students with disabilities including learning disabilities, throughout all levels and sectors of education

The Federation of Parents and Friends Associations of Catholic Schools in South Australia Inc. represents all associations of parent groups in the Catholic Schools system in South Australia. Its affiliates support the work of the Federation and contribute the majority of its funding. (The Federation receives a small annual grant from the South Australian Minister for Education.) The purpose of the Federation is to act as an active advocate and supporter of the role of parents in their contribution to the education of their children in Catholic schools. Its principal activities include: to be responsive to the needs of affiliates; to provide information and learning opportunities for parents and friends in matters related to the education of their children, and to represent the diversity of parents' views in Catholic school curriculum and resources.

The Federation has given high priority to advocating on behalf of the needs and interests of parents with children with disabilities and welcomes this Senate Inquiry and the chance to reflect the interests of parents of children with disabilities attending Catholic schools in South Australia. The Federation supports the inclusion of learning disabilities in this inquiry.

The Federation supports the Australian Government's implementation of the Charter of Rights of the Family, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Declaration of the Rights of Disabled Persons and the Convention on the Rights of the Child in their advocacy for the provision of education and assistance to ensure access and rights for all children, regardless of their levels of ability and their preferred "cultural and spiritual development":

Submission

In preparing this submission the Federation wishes to acknowledge that it does not have the resources to undertake detailed empirical research on the conditions of education for children with disabilities in the Catholic Education System. As representative of parents' interests, the Federation has chosen to limit its scope of response to those individual issues raised by parents with the Federation over time. As such, the information provided in this submission is anecdotal and of limited and specialised sampling. As well, the Federation recognises that children with disabilities are a very diverse group and that the nature of disability does not define nor limit a child's learning needs. Therefore the comments in this submission will be generalist and may apply with very varying degrees of relevance in the total scope of individual circumstances.

The Federation supports the analysis and recommendations found in the submissions from the Australian Parents' Council, and gives general support to the submissions of The National Council of Independent Schools Association and the Catholic Education Office of South Australia. In particular, the Federation wishes to draw to the attention of the Inquiry the significant discrepancy in the levels of government subsidies for those children in government schools, and those children whose parent have chosen to send them to Catholic schools. There

can be no justification for this discrimination under the International Charters which Australia has committed itself to implementing.

The Federation also wishes to acknowledge that parents of children with disabilities do not choose their children's schools lightly but take great care to select schools which they trust will best suit their children's special needs. Because of this, parents will be especially discerning and will actively critique the care and educational provision of the schools they select. They will also be well represented in parent associations and school boards because of their heightened interest and keen sense of responsibility. Parents of children in Catholic schools choose to send their children to Catholic schools because of their belief in the extended supportive role played by the whole school community. This sense of community belonging is particularly valued by parents of children with disabilities.

Despite examples of individual hardship and obstacles within the system, the parents who have provided information and personal stories of their experiences to the Federation, continue to see overall advantages for their children within the Catholic education system. Parents who have compared the provision of support for their children with disabilities have observed that, despite the reduced State support for children in Catholic Schools, resources are managed in a way which, in general, results in better access and better quality of support.

1. Criteria used to define disability.

The government criteria for disability is an essential factor in determining levels of support for children, yet some parents experience frustration in what they perceive to be the lack of transparency and lack of consistency in the application of criteria.

When funding is linked to levels of disability, criteria can be adjusted to redefine funding commitments. Currently criteria is confused by historical and obsolete demarcations and by rigid stratifications of need, without sufficient consideration of family circumstances.

Criteria needs a major review to refocus on the full implications for educational and learning opportunities and the resources needed to overcome the obstacles which impede children with disabilities in the education system. Such a review should also determine actual implications for the realistic level of support for children attending mainstream schools.

In particular, the use of a hierarchy of disability should be tempered by a case management model based on individual needs and individualised strategies and resources including a collaborative partnership between available services and resources and with parents and needs to include a process of continuous review.

2. Accuracy of assessment

Accurate and early assessment is fundamental to all other aspects of developmental support and resources. Assessment must be reliable and based on current professional practice for specific conditions and must be transparent in applying credible processes with the active involvement of parents. Assessment processes should more appropriately be the responsibility of children's services and disability resources with equal access for all children, independent of the school attended.

There is a limited availability of publicly provided psychological assessment for children in Catholic schools. This means that early identification and intervention is not always available for those who cannot afford private assessment. Children can reach school leaving age without the necessary social and basic learning skills to equip them for vocational training.

Where there is an inadequacy of professional assessment of disabilities, inappropriate assessment has been conducted by teaching consultants and aides, although this is not part of their professional role.

It is essential that protocols define the need for parents to be closely involved and consulted in the assessment process and given access to assessment activities and reports.

3. Particular needs of children with complex disadvantage

Catholic schools cater for families from all socio-economic levels and with all combinations of complex needs. In significant and increasing numbers, parents make a deliberate choice to send their children with disabilities to Catholic schools because of their trust in the importance of community support, pastoral care and Christian values that reflect the families values. Current State Government policies about access to publicly funded support services do not adequately recognise the needs and rights of children attending non-government schools. As a result, families and schools in communities with limited resources are left to manage with those limited resources, perpetuating and multiplying unfairly the disadvantages to children in those communities.

In South Australia, children with disabilities attending Catholic schools do not have automatic access to publicly funded services such as State funded technology and school transport. This creates particular obstacles for children in rural areas and an unfair burden on the families of children who attend special schools or schools with special units, not necessarily close to the home of the children.

4. Effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs

Early intervention has clearly demonstrated success for children with learning difficulties, especially in literacy. Currently in South Australia, because government subsidies fall significantly short of the services, children in Catholic schools have to depend on resources drawn from the general revenue of the school and compete with needs from all other areas of demand. Dedicated support and resources based on actual need and realistic requirements, would ensure that needs could be targeted on the basis of fair and equitable distribution and accountability could be reported against targeted needs.

Professional training and development for teachers in kindergarten and junior primary school must include a significant compulsory component of identification and understanding of disabilities and learning difficulties and their developmental impact. Such skills can no longer be restricted to specialist training and elective courses in teacher training courses. Intervention models used by teachers should be designed to build on the nurturing and teaching role of parents, recognising the well documented educational benefits of active involvement of parents in the processes of the school, especially in recognising parents detailed knowledge of their children's uniqueness.

Early assessment and educational intervention policies and resources must ensure that children who attend Catholic schools are not disadvantaged by the exercising of their parents' choice of school systems, through unrealistic and inequitable resource allocation.

5. Access to and adequacy of funding and support

Parents with children with disabilities carry an unreasonable personal burden for the care and development of their children. Community investment in child care, kindergartens, schools and training agencies can provide the most significant support for the families of children with disabilities, sharing the impact of disabilities across the wider community.

Understandably, the parents of children with disabilities will be both concerned to be closely involved in their children's care, and in need of additional respite and relief from the demands associated with high levels of care. This is a constant for all families with children with disabilities regardless of their resources, religion, location, income and choice of school.

Funding and resources for the education of children with disabilities should be based on the support needed by individual children to address their specific disability regardless of the parents' personal values and choice of schooling.

The current government formula for funding based on level of disability results in the disabled competing with other disabled for the one source of resources. Inevitably, the bulk of resources goes to children with the most severe support needs. There may be value in separating the funding of personal support needs of children with disabilities from the educational support needs and encouraging more creative and innovative approaches to meeting those educational support needs. Under the present system, there is the possibility that the significant majority of support resources from education are being used for personal support. This is more appropriately part of the budgets and resources of human services portfolios, thus ensuring that all children with disabilities are supported for their disability and not discriminated against in education because of the choice of school system as is now the case.

Children attending small schools are additionally disadvantaged where cost effectiveness acts against adequate specialist services for individuals. This compounds the limited generic resources available in small communities. Traditional models of support need reviewing to allow the more creative design and use of resources including support for the customisation of community and family network support. This should include sponsoring innovative use of technology in children's homes to link them with learning opportunities which go beyond the school classroom and curriculum and which enhance the essential support provided by families.

6. Programs for learning opportunities with mainstream students

The parents of children with disabilities value the provision of a range of options for the education of their children. Learning opportunities and pathways should, ideally, reflect the effectiveness of services available to the general community.

While recognising that there is a wide spectrum of disability with greater and lesser capacity for inclusion in mainstream opportunities, the preferred option is genuine inclusion, where

children are able to learn in special units and in mainstream groups according to their learning needs. Such experiences should challenge the separation of the children with disability and challenge incidences of covert discrimination and allocation to demeaning activities and stigmatisation.

The successful inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream programs depends on the culture and leadership in the school community, the skills and attitudes of teachers, the understanding and awareness of fellow students and the provision of levels of support, which allow real and effective learning experiences for all. It is important in the training of teachers to recognise that the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools is not just for the benefit of integration for the child with disabilities, but an important strategy to benefit the total school community and promote understanding, awareness and acceptance for the greater community. Unfortunately, the cost of providing resources for children with disabilities can result in individual schools and teachers regarding children with special needs as merely a burden. At the same time, schools with very limited resources have had an outstanding impact on the culture of inclusion in the school for the benefit of the whole school community.

7. Teacher training and professional development

The skills, attitudes and professional resources of teachers are essential for effective learning for all children. The inclusion of children with disabilities in general school programs must be allowed to challenge the current design and provision of teacher training. It highlights the need for both the review of teacher training in light of policies of inclusive education and the need for investment in on-going professional development of current staff. Anecdotal information from parents seriously questions the quality and relevance of generalist training components for their failure to address the issues of teaching children with disabilities and also questions the currency of “special education” options being optional rather than compulsory, and for reflecting obsolete paradigms in the nature of disability and support.

Some parents of children with disability have reported worrying examples of a lack of skill and understanding of cognitive development practices and lack of awareness of duty of care and legislated responsibilities but also active discriminatory practices and attitudes by teachers and school staff. Parents have also expressed concern at the failure of teachers to correct discriminatory actions and attitudes towards disabled children displayed by children in their charge.

Given the special vulnerability of children with disabilities and the need for additional levels of care and protection expected by parents, it is important that teacher training also includes a sound and contemporary knowledge of the important role of parents in their children’s school and development.

Teacher training courses need to reflect the reality of current educational policies and practice in the area of education for children with disabilities. Professional development programs and course reviews should include a wide range of interest groups including parent organisations, as well as the usual academic content. With the understanding and commitment of school communities, kindergartens and schools could become more valuable community resource centres for diverse programs catering for a wide range of special needs. Schools could tap into

greater community resources to enhance the interdependence of the whole community in continuous and diverse learning experiences for children and adults with special support needs.

Summary

While the Federation appreciates the recognition by the Commonwealth Government of the vital contribution of the Catholic School sector through its funding for non-government schools, it continues to struggle with the inadequacy and inconsistency of State Government funding. South Australian Catholic Schools receive the lowest contribution of State Governments to the sector. As in so many other examples of essential human services, individual Australian are illogically disadvantaged by the accident of their location of residence. More importantly, the determination of mainstream formulae for funding and access to resources flows on to continue the disadvantage for children with disabilities. As a first move to redress this injustice for children with disabilities, the provision of educational funding and resources must be separated from the arbitrary formula used to determine State Government assistance for children in non-government schools.

As well, governments should be encouraged to continue the current trends for devolution of decision making to school communities in the interests of strengthening those communities for the benefits of all children, but particularly vulnerable children who will continue to need the support of communities throughout their whole lives. Parents will judge schools and their services by the confidence they feel for the welfare of their children in the educational model which suits them. In turn, governments should acknowledge the “Overwhelming international evidence (that) shows that if parents and communities have a real say in the running of schools, not only does parental satisfaction with schooling increase, but students’ academic achievement improves.” (John Roskam, *The Australian*. 17/4/02). A funding and support system which resources the individual child, rather than the school would provide a realistic lever to adjust the balance of responsibility and influence in our education system.