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Member of the Australian Council of State School Organisations Inc.

Submission to the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee by the Victorian Council of School Organisations (VICCSO) to the:

Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities

The terms of reference are to:

(1) Inquire into the education of students with disabilities, including learning disabilities, throughout all levels and sectors of education, with particular reference to:

(a) whether current policies and programs for students with disabilities are adequate to meet their education needs, including, but not limited to:

i) the criteria used to define disability and to differentiate between levels of handicap,
The Senate Committee needs to consider the issue of definition carefully. In Victoria, the way in which funding is tied to levels of disability has led to a focus on the disability and a concomitant disregard for the needs of the individual student. It has also led to a tendency to overstate disability in order to receive higher levels of funding. The general recommendations coming from the disability and education sectors in Victoria is that funding should be determined on the basis of individual needs. This of course assumes that if a need is determined, funding will be available to meet that need. In Victoria however, there is already a funding shortfall for students who have qualified under stringent definitions of disability, and there is pressure to provide more educational resources for students who have not traditionally been funded, for example students with ADHD, dyslexia, and severe behavioural problems.

Research could provide benchmark levels of funding for different types of needs and the programs and resources needed to meet those needs, and these benchmarks could be used as a guide to validate requests for funding which are prepared at the school level on the basis of the individual student's educational needs.

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

The process for assessing students' level of disability and consequent funding "entitlement" is often disputed by parents of children in Victorian schools. These disputes stem from the belief that the needs of students are not being met, and the consequent attempt to secure more funding. This in turn leads to an overstatement of disability. The current Victorian system, with its funding focus on disability and its lack of resources for professional development in inclusive education across the board, has led to an over-reliance on integration aides. Within this framework, schools and parents are often fighting for more aide time rather than focusing on other ways in which the students needs may be met. This is because focusing on needs will not get them the extra funds needed.

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

In some rural areas of Victoria there are too few support services for students with particular disabilities. Following the disbanding of School Support Centres and the allocation of specialist staff to schools, many services have disappeared or access has become impossible.

iv) the effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs,

Early Childhood Education in Victoria is not run by the Department of Education.

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

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

The integration of students with disabilities into mainstream schools in Victoria has been very popular, with many parents taking up this option. In the last few years however, the failure of integration has led to a drift back to specialist schools. Whilst specialist schools clearly provide the appropriate educational setting for some students, it is regrettable that parents who wish for their children to be in mainstream schools are feeling that this is not really an option. There has been a failure to fully incorporate students with disabilities into mainstream programs. Lacking the skills required for inclusive education, many teachers rely heavily on largely untrained aides to look after students with disabilities, and these students, whilst physically in a mainstream classroom, are often not receiving learning opportunities. In the worst cases, their learning opportunities are reduced and it is for this reason parents are forced to choose between "special" education and under-resourced, ineffective "inclusive" education.

vii) teacher training and professional development, and

Training in inclusive education in teacher pre-service is virtually non-existent. The devolution of responsibility for professional development to schools has meant that professional development in this area is patchy at best. Whilst program support groups operate in Victorian schools to determine individual needs and learning programs, there is a lack of skills in using these groups effectively and a lack of professional support in the form of teachers who are specialists in inclusive education.

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

All children under 15 in Victoria are entitled to free instruction in the key learning areas.

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

Education is a state responsibility. Funding for education comes from the Commonwealth via the States Grants. Decisions about resourcing students with disabilities and their supports must be made at a system level and supported through a systemic structure. This includes support for parents, advocacy support, professional development for all teachers and Integration support staff.

There is a growing tendency for funding decisions about individual students and their programs to be shifted to the individual school. With an inadequate level of funding for students with extra educational requirements, a lack of professional development and support for inclusive education and a lack of support for families, especially in the area of advocacy, this means that parents and students will be forced to haggle over the limited funds available at the school level. Decisions about individual needs and programs and resources needed to meet those needs should be determined at the school level. However, the responsibility for funding those needs rests firmly at the systemic level.

(2) That the Committee report to the Senate by the last sitting day in October 2002.

Important information

All communications with the committee and its secretariat are protected by parliamentary privilege. It is expected that submissions will be published unless clearly marked as confidential. Persons making submissions must not disclose them without the prior approval of the committee. Submissions are covered by parliamentary privilege but the unauthorised release of them is not. The committee encourages the lodgement of submissions in electronic form. E-mailed submissions must include the author's full name, phone number and postal address.