

Senate Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities

submission from

Australian Association of Special Education

The Australian Association of Special Education (AASE) is a research-based, non-categorical organisation that advocates for the provision of quality educational services for students with special education needs. Its membership consists of teachers, parents, educational administrators, therapists, and university researchers. This submission is based on these premises and supported through the attached documents: *Quality Education Programs for Students with Special Education Needs* and *Pre-Service Teacher Training*.

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- 1.a.i *We spend far too much time making predictions about students' lives, and far too little time making a difference in their lives.* (Ysseldyke, 2001, p. 302)

Criteria to define disability and differentiate between levels of handicap should be established through consideration of the curriculum and the context in which students are to function. The use of data generated from student's placement in the curriculum permits teachers and school communities to plan and teach directly from eligibility data, as well as monitor the success of programs over time. Current policies and programs utilise criteria that are not directly related to student programs (e.g., tests of cognitive abilities, psychometric assessments), reducing utility of data in the development of programs, and minimising validity of comments on the effectiveness of programs to meet the educational needs of students.

Levels of handicap should be considered in regards to the needs of the students and the demands of the curriculum within the preferred educational setting. An examination of the interaction between the needs of the student and the environment places the emphasis on the quality of the instruction and away from "problems" inside the student (Ysseldyke, 1999, p.6). Emphasising the responsiveness of students to instruction therefore ensures that quality programs are kept at the forefront of all planning and evaluation. [See attached document *Quality Education Programs for Students with Special Education Needs* for further information.]

- 1.a.ii Accuracy of assessing the needs of students will be heightened through the use of curriculum-based measures and functional assessment. These measures have been shown to possess high reliability and validity across students, environments and content (Liaupsin, Scott, & Nelson, 2000; Reschley Tilly & Grimes, 1999; Shinn, 1998). Further, these measures are directly linked to effectiveness of interventions and needs of the students, and can be reviewed on an ongoing basis.

Systematic review of student progress utilising a problem-solving approach emphasises (a) problem identification, clarification and analysis; (b) intervention design and implementation; and (c) ongoing monitoring and evaluation of intervention. (Ysseldyke, 1999, p.9). This process permits factors that affect student performance to be considered at all points of the process, including environment, curricula and instructional variables.

I firmly believe that assessment and intervention efforts with individual students needs to be focused on competency enhancement (moving students for where they are to where we want them to be). We need to be about the job of capacity building

(organizing schools and instruction, training teachers and providing services in ways to enhance our capacity to meet the needs of all students). . (Ysseldyke, 2001, p. 302)

- 1.a.iii The issues discussed in 1.a.i and 1.a.ii can be applied to meet the needs of students with disabilities from low socio-economic, non-English speaking and Indigenous backgrounds and from rural and remote areas. Consideration of issues that surround the curricula, instruction and the environment permit specific issues to be considered. For example, students with special education needs in rural and isolated settings who require specialist therapy services will have the specific difficulties and costs of accessing these services included as part of the assessment needs.

Current assessment and criteria used to define disability do not appear to benefit students in these groups. For example, the National Academy of Science report on *Minority Students in Special and Gifted Education* (Donovan & Cross, 2002) recommends that current assessment-eligibility processes in the United States of America be discontinued in favour of non-categorical conceptions and classification criteria that focus on matching a student's specific needs to an intervention strategy. It further recommends that assessment-eligibility criteria consider competencies in natural settings with close relationships to interventions.

- 1.a.iv Early intervention is perceived as intensive intervention, before school and at school, for any child/student who shows signs of being at-risk of failure in the curriculum. As a result, ongoing monitoring of student progress in the curriculum and/or development is a critical aspect of all education programs to ensure that intervention is early, and focused on the needs of the student.

Early intervention programs for young students with disabilities, including students at-risk of learning difficulties, can maximise educational outcomes for these students. Research indicates these programs are most effective through strong early childhood education and family education and support programs (e.g., Bailey, 2001; Buysse, Wesley & Able-Boone, 2001; Donovan & Cross, 2002). Early parenting programs reduce the chances of later emotional/behavioural problems, and high quality child development programs are characterised as intensive and sustained, provide direct learning experiences in early literacy and language, have a planned curriculum, and are supported through comprehensive support services.

Early screening of students is essential if early difficulties are to be addressed. Screening measures should be linked to the curriculum and have direct relevance for classroom instruction (e.g., *DIBELS*, [Good, Kameenui & Simmons, 2001]; *Early Reading Measures* [Evans, 2001]). Students who do not respond to intervention should be provided with ongoing intensive support in small groups. In the case where students do not respond sufficiently to effective reading practices (e.g., Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998), students should be referred for special education services.

- 1.a.v Funding and support in all sectors should be established through examining the needs of the students in regards to the demands of the curricula, instructional and environmental requirements (e.g., classroom facilities, access to school grounds and facilities, access to community services). Examination of these factors through a problem-solving approach (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Ysseldyke, 1999) ensures that the responsiveness of interventions to the needs of students is assessed and evaluated. This process also ensures that key players in developing and implementing programs (e.g., parents, teachers, executive staff, special educators, allied health personnel) is maintained.

- 1.a.vi The nature, extent and funding of programs should be established through collaborative planning with key stakeholders, and where appropriate, the student. Use of a problem-solving

approach to planning requires all stakeholders to have to state their case, and for their views to be evaluated by the team. This evaluation permits “new” ideas to be floated, contributing to professional development of those present. It also allows for the research base of strategies and ideas to be evaluated in an open forum, prior to important decisions about the need for resources and funds are made.

- 1.a.vii Quality teacher training is an essential component of programs for students with special education needs. All pre-service teacher courses must require students to complete a mandatory subject in special education practices (i.e., 36 hours), provided by university staff with special education qualifications. Currently, New South Wales is the only state that makes this requirement on graduating students. [See paper attached titled *Pre-Service Teacher Training*.]

Subjects currently addressing the education of students with special education needs in pre-service education courses (either mandatory or optional) are of variable quality. Current subjects typically reflect a medically orientated approach, addressing categories of disability. Current research and contemporary approaches to special education clearly articulate the need for all teachers to be prepared in how to design quality education programs (Kavale & Forness, 2000). [See paper attached titled *Quality Education Programs for Students with Special Education Needs* for further information.]

Ongoing, sustained professional development in the area is essential for teachers. The problem-solving approach to meeting the needs is one avenue that could recommend that teachers are provided with the opportunity to up-grade their knowledge of the area when accommodating a students with special education needs in their classroom. Alternatively, ongoing school-wide professional development should be made available and funded for all teachers so they have the opportunity to utilise and reflect on emerging and existing effective special education practices (Chard et al, 2000).

Teachers working with students with special education needs and/or providing assistance to mainstream teachers must have a special education qualification. These personnel have the opportunity to provide professional development for teachers in classrooms through their contact and sharing of professional knowledge. Professional development opportunities are also made available through the problem-solving process as teachers share and evaluate a range of strategies discussed as part of this collaborative process (O’Connor, Notari-Syverson & Vadasy, 1998; Reschly et al., 1999).

Ongoing professional development should be linked to post-graduate qualifications. Flexible delivery and organisation of courses in teacher education faculties across Australia could provide these opportunities, as well as promoting ongoing opportunities for site-based research. This outcome would be beneficial to all involved (i.e, students, families, teachers, university researchers).

- 1.a.viii A non-categorical, problem-solving approach to meeting the needs of students with disabilities and special education needs ensures that current Commonwealth and state and territory legislation is met. Current practices do not emphasise effectiveness of educational programs, highlighting instead features of students that are inherently beyond the teacher. This above process focuses the teacher on the needs of the student, effective instructional outcomes and the interaction of the student with their environment.

- 1.b The Commonwealth and states and territories can support the education of students with disabilities, including those students experiencing difficulties learning, through ensuring research-based approaches are supported and resourced in all education settings. Current practices do not achieve this outcome as they are based on an identification process that uses criteria that are embedded within the student (i.e., theoretically static traits). Through focusing on research-based practices, and how they

are meeting the needs of students, ensures effective implementation of Commonwealth and state and territory legislation.

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