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To: Visitor.Services@aph.gov.au

Subject: submission

Senate Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities

Dear Senators

At last some level of government is examining the woeful shame that is laughingly called the education of children with disabilities.

I come from a background of almost twenty years in teaching, including many students with physical and mental disabilities. But added to that is having been a minor volunteer with Yooralla and others many years ago as my first cousin Joan is what many of you would call spastic.

So in brief, allow me to discuss the following points:-

1. So called 'normal' schools are usually not the appropriate place for such deserving children despite the political movement that saw many specialized centres closed down and integration brought in, during the 1980s and 1990s.
2. Schools rarely have adequate numbers of aides to assist such children
3. Such aides are rarely properly qualified and certainly not properly equipped.
4. Teachers are themselves not trained in what to do, how to assist, how to cope...
5. Teachers simply do not have the time that such students rightly deserve and thus they are often left isolated within the classroom.
6. Schools generally do not have appropriate sporting facilities for such students
7. Some schools still do not cater for wheel chair bound students. Others that do have ramps do not have desks that allow wheelchairs to fit comfortably, thus leading to other issues for students with disabilities.
8. Some schools are interested in numbers and in the income that they receive as distinct from the children themselves.

1. So called 'normal' schools are usually not the appropriate place for such deserving children despite the political movement that saw many specialized centres closed down and integration brought in, during the 1980s and 1990s.

I fully realize that this is a highly sensitive issue and I could write a large dissertation on it alone, but there is no way that a disabled child will become "normal" or whatever you call it by attending a school with every other child. Far too often the reverse is true because they simply do not get anywhere near the attention that they deserve by attending so called regular schools.

Parents may have certain wishes for their children but the experiment by Joan Kirner in Victoria, to close special schools and integrate children with disabilities into other schools has been an abject failure. These schools do not have the trained staff, facilities, educational resources, number of aides... that such children NEED. Moreover, while most children do not take offense... to disabled children in the school they also do not warm to them. In support of this statement I assisted in a very minor way with Spastic Centres such as Yooralla and I have been a co-ordinator/ teacher within schools with disabled children. My comments derive from first hand experience.

2. Schools rarely have adequate numbers of aides to assist such children.

Let's be blunt. These children have a right to attention, to support and a significant number respond well to education. But they require nay demand far more personalized support than the ill equipped and untrained (in these areas) teacher can offer. They require competent aides. Every aide that I have ever met has a warm heart and a caring nature. But few of them are exceptionally well trained and even then their numbers are pathetically low.

One aide in a room with four or more integration students plus one or two children with disabilities and possibly a few more bordering on integration is a laughable indeed pitiful fact at my own school. How then can anyone claim that disabled students are being given anywhere an equal chance at education?

What is worse is when, such as at my own secondary school, a teacher aide is used for some five to six weeks typing up programs to adhere to government requirements regarding integration and disabled students. This aide was required in the classroom and any competent typist could/ should have been employed for the task rather than removing an aide from a far more important duty.

3. Such aides are rarely properly qualified and certainly not properly equipped.

Why is it that teachers in Victoria have access to a great lap top program (albeit it is being abused by many teachers who loan the laptops to their children, or who simply cannot use them due to a lack of training) and yet teacher aides do not? Why are facilities, resources... either antiquated or not present? What specific educational facilities, texts, software programs, internet websites exist for a teacher such as myself

or the caring and devoted aide who seeks to give a disabled student a fair chance at a meaningful education?

The answer is negative!

4. Teachers are themselves not trained in what to do, how to assist, how to cope...

I have taught disabled students and integration students since my very first year of teaching in 1983; but my sole training was the relationship that I had with my cousin Joan, helping Yooralla and such ? minimal at best and certainly totally inadequate to give needy students the care and attention that they justifiably deserve. Or is ex ALP member Dr Nelson MBBS and Liberal Education Minister going to make things different? I doubt it!

I am willing to be trained but no one is offering and, to be blunt, it should be paid for by government, if most MPs can call themselves Christian.

5. Teachers simply do not have the time that such students rightly deserve and thus they are often left isolated within the classroom.

In a class of twenty five students, time is precious. Disabled students and integration students require far more personal attention and more support than the regular students do. A disabled child requires far greater attention than I normally have the professional time to offer ? thus the greater reliance on aides on the occasions that I do have them. I do not have them in every class and yet I have integration students in every single class that I teach at my current school.

Yet I feel guilty that I am unable to sit with them to develop personal programs, to honestly modify the work that is given to other students.

6. Schools generally do not have appropriate sporting facilities for such students

So how do disabled kids play sport in a so called regular or normal school? The school where I work lacks specific sporting facilities and programs for disabled students. I am an Olympic credentialled weightlifting coach and power lifting is a sport that wheel chair bound athletes can participate in; but at my school as with so many others I cannot accept any wheel bound child as my 'room' us up stairs, with no elevator.

Indeed, we have no specific sport offerings for these children. We just hope that they will not seek to be actively involved and I am generalising across the profession based upon past experience.

7. Some schools still do not cater for wheel chair bound students.

Others that do have ramps do not have desks that allow wheelchairs to fit comfortably, thus leading to other issues for students with disabilities.

I have a student in a wheel chair. She can access most classrooms via ramps. But do you think that we have tables that she can fit under to get close for her school work? And do you know, as she and her aide have both advised me that the twisting required to cope with these tables causes her lower back pain? Is that a potential law suit???

8. Some schools are interested in numbers and in the income that they receive as distinct from the children themselves. My own principal has advised staff that each child is worth \$4,500.00 to the school, and that does not include what additional monies I assume that is received for disabled and integration students.

But allow me to refer to one mentally disabled boy, a very good boy, who was once at the school where I teach. For various reasons his parents and he decided to remove him from the school. The teacher in charge of integration ? according to the student as told to me and another teacher? then effectively harassed the family to bring him back to their school. They received letters and phone calls such that they changed their phone number. She then turned up on their door step and rang at the parents' places of work. The student came back but then left again and this time his family moved.

He advised me, in front of another teacher, that he almost never had access to an aide despite direct promises to his parents, that he had little support and no real interest from the school. The teacher in charge of integration is the partner of the principal so I would assume that she would have some authority and certainly better access than any other teacher to his thoughts and to developing the appropriate policies.

Disabled children have a right to a full and complete education, according to their degree of disability. But the education system is totally ungeared to cater for their pressing needs other than the gratuitous ramp here and there. Something better must be determined.

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