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# **SUBMISSION TO SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

ACT P&C Council welcomes the Senate Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities, for we believe that there are many issues in this area which need to be addressed. We do not have specific expertise in relation to the diversity of needs and modes of provision for students with disabilities, but we believe that it is important to outline some principles, which should apply to the education of students with disabilities.

### **Some general principles**

One principle is that special additional support for the education of students with disabilities should be provided to all children with special needs, including physical, intellectual and behavioural/emotional needs.

Well-qualified professionals should establish the additional education support needs of each student in close consultation with the parents/carers of the child. This process should identify an individual education plan for each child, which sets clear goals for each child taking into account the nature and severity of their disability. This process should identify all the support needed by each student to achieve the agreed goals. This process should not be limited, in the first instance, by available resources, but should be driven by the educational needs of the child. However, this process should be realistic in resource demands.

### **Some specific issues**

Three more specific issues have been raised with us by the community of parents of students with disabilities within the ACT.

The first relates to the integration of students with disabilities into mainstream schooling. While parents are generally supportive of this approach, there are major concerns about the level of provision of support within the classroom for integrated students, and it is clear that for the integration approach to be fully effective, increased levels of support are required. These comments apply not only to students who are integrated on a full-time basis, but also to students who are only able to manage shorter periods of integration and for whom the provision of support is at least as important in order that the integration is effective for all.

A closely related issue is that of the provision of other non-educational therapeutic services within the school environment. There is considerable concern at the approach of training teachers, teachers' assistants and family members to substitute for the delivery of services by specialists to the detriment of service delivery. Increased resourcing of central therapy services is the solution.

The third issue is that of the generally lower level of provision of services and support to students with disabilities in secondary schools, compared to those available in primary schools. Here the issue appears to be both lack of resources and the need for an integrated model of service delivery from birth through to the end of a child's school years at least.

### **Some funding issues**

One area on which we wish to make specific comment is that of funding. It is clear that funding is currently inadequate to achieve the principles outlined above. It is unfortunately equally clear that the potential funding commitments in this area are virtually without limit, if the goal is equality in educational outcomes for all students who are capable of achieving that goal. It therefore requires a constant tension between achieving as much of the goal as possible and the limits imposed by the funding available.

Within this context, we are concerned at the general claim put forward by the independent and Catholic sectors that they are under-funded relative to government schools to educate students with disabilities, for we believe that this is a claim that is essentially without substance.

Table 3A.11 of the Report on Government Service Provision 2002 gives figures on the level of government expenditure per student in government and non-government schools in 1999-2000 for each State and Territory in Australia. The ratio of per capita funding received in the non-government sector to that received in the government sector gives the per capita funding received in the non-government sector from government as a percentage of that received in the government sector.

**TABLE 1**

**Per capita expenditure in government and non-government schools (1999-2000) and the ratio of funding received by non-government schools from government to that received by government schools**

	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	TAS	ACT	NT	Aust
NGS	4210	3719	4466	4580	3864	4163	3886	6764	4139
GS	6907	6605	7097	6779	7298	7415	7424	12346	6984
Ratio	0.61	0.56	0.63	0.68	0.53	0.56	0.52	0.55	0.59

These figures include the costs of superannuation in determining the level of support provided to government schools. It is arguable whether they should be included in their entirety, given that in general, the level of provision of superannuation for staff in the non-government sector is lower than in the government sector. This is just one example of where the real costs of educational provision to the level of that provided by government schools are lower in the non-government sector.

Since the per capita figures for the government sector include all expenditure on special education, averaged out over the total student population, this means that the non-government sector receives from government, in its current baseline funding, the same proportion of per capita funding for students with disabilities that is given by the ratio in Table 1, on the assumption that the non-government sector enrolls the same proportion on students with disabilities.

The key question is then what is the performance of the non-government sector in relation to students with disabilities.

Table 3A.14 of the Report on Government Service Provision 2002 gives figures for the percentage of students with disabilities in government and non-government schools. These are reproduced in Table 2.

**TABLE 2**  
**Percentage enrolment of students with disabilities in government and non-government schools, and the enrolment ratio**

	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	TAS	ACT	NT	Aust
<b>GS%</b>	<b>4.2</b>	<b>3.4</b>	<b>3.0</b>	<b>4.0</b>	<b>4.5</b>	<b>4.7</b>	<b>3.7</b>	<b>14.9</b>	<b>3.9</b>
<b>NGS</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>1.6</b>	<b>1.4</b>	<b>1.3</b>	<b>2.9</b>	<b>1.3</b>	<b>1.2</b>	<b>2.8</b>	<b>2.0</b>
<b>%</b>									
<b>Ratio</b>	<b>0.62</b>	<b>0.47</b>	<b>0.47</b>	<b>0.33</b>	<b>0.64</b>	<b>0.28</b>	<b>0.32</b>	<b>0.19</b>	<b>0.51</b>

If the percentage enrolments were the same, the ratio would be 1.0. Values above 1.0 would indicate a higher proportion of students with disabilities enrolled in non-government schools than in government schools. Values below 1.0 indicate that there is a lower proportion of students with disabilities enrolled in non-government schools than in government schools. These figures therefore show that in all jurisdictions in Australia, the proportion of students with disabilities in non-government schools is significantly lower than in government schools.

### **Expectations of non-government schools**

Given this general pattern of under-enrolment of students with disabilities in non-government schools, the question is then what expectations should we have of the non-government sector.

### ***Social expectations***

One possible social expectation would be that non-government schools should enrol the same proportion of students with disabilities, in which case the ratios in Table 2 should all be 1.0.

Most schools in the non-government sector are associated with particular religious, ethnic or social groups, and claim to serve their needs. A priori, it would be anticipated that the proportion of students with disabilities would be similar across social groups, yet non-government schools clearly do not enrol the same proportion of students with disabilities as government schools. This level of expectation is re-inforced by the fact that many of the schools in the non-government sector are classified as charities or public benevolent institutions, and benefit from considerable taxation concessions on this basis.

It is clear that on this social expectation based on service to the communities non-government schools claim to represent, and based on their classification as charities and public benevolent institutions, the non-government sector as a whole, in all jurisdictions, is failing to perform to expectation.

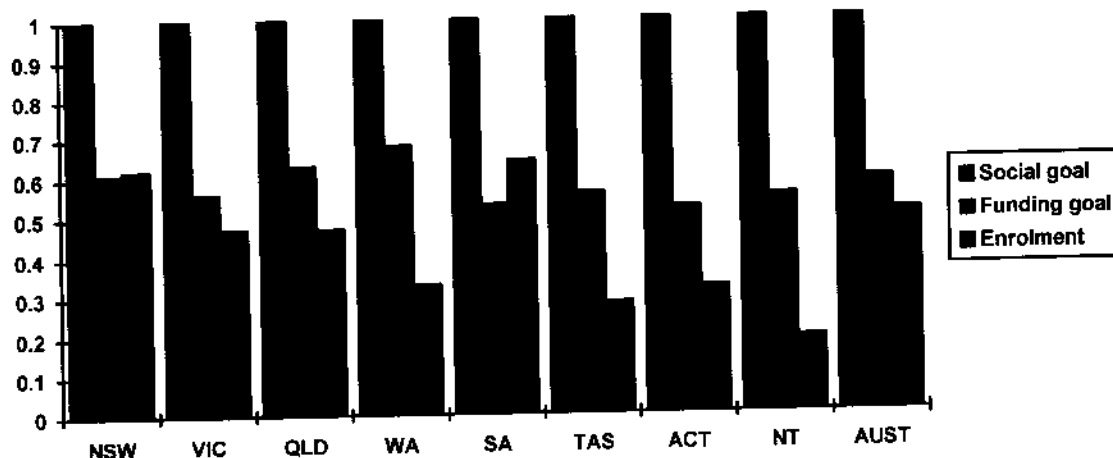
### ***Funding expectations***

A different, less principled and altruistic expectation comes from the level of government funding that non-government schools currently receive. On this expectation, non-government schools should enrol the proportion of government school enrolments of students with disabilities prescribed by their funding ratio. It should be noted that this expectation makes no call on the contributions made by parents to non-government schools through fees and other charges, or to support provided by churches and other institutions.

On this funding expectation, the funding and enrolment ratios in Tables 1 and 2 should correspond. However, as shown in figure 1, on national average figures, the non-government sector as a whole is under-performing in relation to the enrolment of students with disabilities. In one jurisdiction, South Australia, there may be a case, after more detailed analysis, for increased funding for the non-government sector. In New South Wales, the non-government sector appears to be up to par on this measure, but in all other jurisdictions, the non-government sector is under-performing by under-enrolling relative to expectation.

**FIGURE 1**

**Performance of non-government schools in terms of enrolments of students with disabilities relative to social targets and targets based on government funding**



### **Conclusions from this analysis**

What this means is that in most jurisdictions in Australia, the non-government sector is receiving a share of the funding that government schools receive for students with disabilities, but is not spending it on students with disabilities, but on other students. Putting it another way, non-government schools in most jurisdictions in Australia, could increase their enrolment of students with disabilities significantly, within the limits of the government funding that they currently receive.

### **Refinement of this analysis**

This analysis needs to be refined, because the non-government sector is very diverse, covering systemic Catholic schools and independent schools. The independent school sector is itself very diverse, covering a range of schools from poorly-resourced Aboriginal schools to the most socially elite schools in Australia, as well as independent special schools operated by organisations such as the Royal Blind Society.

We have refined this analysis for one jurisdiction only, that of the ACT, where we have obtained precise figures on enrolments in the systemic Catholic and independent sectors, and compared them to funding ratios. In both cases, the two sectors significantly under-perform in terms of enrolments of students with disabilities relative to both the moral and funded expectations, as is shown in the article appended.

### **Extension of this analysis**

This analysis sets up a general principle which we believe should be applied to the analysis of school funding, namely that government funding for a school carries with it social obligations, specifically including the obligation to enrol a

proportional share of high cost student groups, such as students with disabilities, Indigenous students, students from low income families, students in rural and remote areas, or students who pose major behavioural problems outside the definition of students with disabilities.

We have shown in this submission that non-government schools under-enrol students with disabilities, relative to the level of government funding they receive. We believe that non-government schools under-enrol most of the other high cost groups of students identified, both in absolute terms and in terms of the government funding they currently receive.

Precise figures on the enrolments and differential costs of educating these groups of students are difficult to obtain, but Table 3A.12 of the Report on Government Service Provision 2002 gives figures on the relative enrolments of Indigenous students, reproduced as Table 3.

**TABLE 3**  
**Percentage enrolments of Indigenous students in government and non-government schools**

	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	TAS	ACT	NT	Aust
GS%	3.9	1.0	6.3	6.3	3.4	6.4	1.9	38.1	4.3
NGS	0.9	0.2	2.2	3.3	0.7	2.4	0.7	28.4	1.4
%									
Ratio	0.23	0.20	0.35	0.52	0.21	0.38	0.37	0.75	0.33

A simple comparison of the funding ratios in Table 2 with the enrolment ratio in Table 3 shows that non-government schools, in all jurisdictions except for the Northern Territory, are under-performing in relation to the enrolment of Indigenous students. More detailed analysis of the ACT figures shows that the independent sector under-performs in terms of enrolment of Indigenous students, while the Catholic system is closer to its funding target, but still under-performs relative to the social target.

### **Overall resource levels**

Another factor which needs to be taken into account is the overall resource levels which schools have. National figures show that schools in the independent sector operate, on average, at per capita resource levels well above those of government schools, receive substantial support from government, and under-perform in relation to the enrolment of identified equity target groups of high cost students. Schools in the Catholic system operate at rather similar resource levels to government schools, receive from government a higher proportion of the funding received by government schools, and under-perform in relation to the enrolment of identified equity target groups of high cost students.

We do not believe that this funding and enrolment situation which is inequitable towards government schools should be addressed by obliging students from

these target equity groups to enrol in non-government schools, although non-government schools may chose to recruit more. Many parents of children in these groups chose to send their children to government schools because, with in general more limited resources, they offer greater support to students with special needs, and a generally more inclusive environment. Many schools in the non-government sector have selective enrolment practices which discriminate against students from equity target groups, including students with disabilities, and in some cases, particularly with students with major behavioural problems, these students are actively encouraged or even forced to leave the non-government sector and enrol in government schools.

Rather, we argue that the resources available to non-government schools should be weighted to take account of their student profile, in particular what appears to be a quite systematic under-enrolment of high cost groups of students. When this is done, we believe that it will be clear that schools in the independent sector are grossly over-resourced relative to government schools, and will therefore have a low or zero priority for increased government funding on equity grounds. We believe that it will also be clear that systemic Catholic schools will have a higher priority for funding increases than independent schools, but a lower priority than government schools on equity grounds.

We are aware that there are some who argue that promotion of choice is as important if not more important than equity and that parental choice should be subsidised as a social priority. We reject this proposition, and argue that the first priority must be funding to achieve greater equity in outcomes, which means putting increased government funding into the schools which are the least well-resourced relative to their educational roles, namely government schools, which are disproportionately the major providers of education to students from equity target groups, including students with disabilities.

Ian Morgan,  
President  
3 May 2002