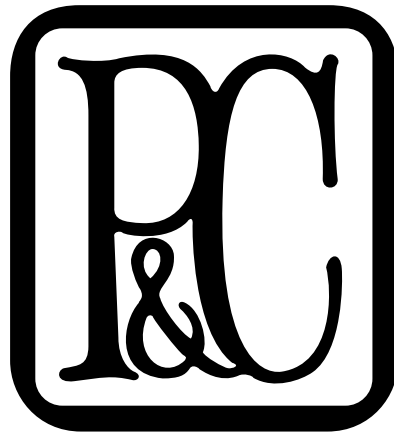


**Federation of Parents and Citizens'
Associations
of New South Wales**

SUBMISSION



**To the
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee**

**Regarding
Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities**

7 May 2002

Preamble

The Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of New South Wales is committed to a free public education system which is open to all people irrespective of culture, gender, academic ability and socio-economic class and empowers students to control their own lives and be contributing members of society.

This commitment is based on the belief that:

- ◇ All students have the capacity to learn;
- ◇ The Government has prime responsibility to provide an education system open to all which is free and secular;
- ◇ Schools should be structured to meet the needs of individual students and should respect the knowledge those students bring to school and build on that knowledge to foster their understanding about the world.

Parents, as partners in the education process, have a right and a responsibility to play an active role in the education of their children. P&C Federation and its representatives share a responsibility of ensuring representative decision making for the benefit of all students. P&C Federation's annual conference, attended by representatives of its 2100 affiliate associations, develops policy which is energetically promoted by P&C Federation's democratically elected Council.

Introduction

The Federation believes that students with disabilities are not acknowledged to a satisfactory standard in the education system. While they may be acknowledged to a satisfactory standard in the *New South Wales Disabilities Action Plan* as well as the *Disability Framework*, it is the practice of these strategies which is of concern.

Major problems identified at the New South Wales level include an endemic lack of professional knowledge and skill amongst teachers, poor communication between schools and their communities and poor resourcing and participation for early intervention programs. The most urgent problem facing students with disabilities is early identification. This can not properly be carried out in schools where resources and expertise are lacking. A concrete process needs to be implemented in all schools that incorporates identification, proper assessment, diagnosis and the development of an individual educational plan. The Federation believes that this kind of strategy will be an educational investment that will address student's educational outcomes and disability related behavioural issues.

The Federation is of the perspective that all students have the right to attend their local school. Those students's with special needs are equally deserving of this right. The Federation opposes to removing students with disabilities from their local communities to attend schools which can 'deal' with their special needs. We oppose to this as a matter of principle, but also because it is not usually in a child's best interests to be separated from siblings and family members. These are problems that need to be resolved through a Federal strategy that targets funding to provide extra resources to make the disabilities strategy work. With 80% of students with disabilities in public schools, it is not unreasonable to expect a national commitment to service this group's needs.

The P&C Federation Recommendations

- 1. That the criteria used to define disabilities is expanded and a clarification of learning disabilities be included in this definition.**
- 2. That the criteria remain flexible and that an individual approach to disability assessment is upheld.**
- 3. That access to qualified health professionals be made available on site across all public schools. Therapeutic services should be initiated through a bilateral strategy between the Department of Health and Aged Care and the Department of Education, Science and Training.**
- 4. That the Department of Education, Science and Training fund the NSW Department of Education and Training to take individual case management as part of its duties through the establishment of education management plans.**
- 5. That early intervention strategies be explored to assist in the identification of students with learning and/or other disabilities.**
- 6. That disability assessment panels are consistently applied across all public schools and that an appeals mechanism is formally set in place. These panels should include the following participants: parent, school counsellor, district general officer, principal, teacher, teacher's aide and qualified health professionals.**
- 7. That Federal funding be targeted at each of the following groups:**

Students with disabilities from

- low socio-economic,**

- non-English speaking,
 - Indigenous backgrounds and from
 - rural and remote areas.
8. That parents are offered access to participate at no cost in training and development programs regarding student's disabilities.
 9. That educational planning for students with disabilities is improved with enhanced communication between ECHS, Preschool and Primary School.
 10. That the Federal government publicly fund preschools in all state schools under the direction of the Department of Education, Science and Training.
 11. That funding is directed toward improving access to disability programs. Funding should be targeted in the following areas; improving the professional expertise for teachers and teacher's aides, provision of qualified health professionals and extra funding support for programs.
 12. That the Federal Government funds teacher professional development in special education as a priority funding area.
 13. That the qualifications framework for teacher aides, teacher aide special and STLDS be evaluated to utilize the professional knowledge base of these roles.
 14. That research is conducted into the relationships between teaching methods, learning styles and learning difficulties.
 15. That a Federal disability strategy be initiated that targets funding to the states and territories.

Terms of Reference

- 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 Federation believes that the criteria used to define disability is too narrow and marginalises a number of students who legitimately deserve remediation. This is especially apparent for those students who suffer from learning disabilities. We believe that these students are not receiving adequate attention and should be incorporated more clearly under the disabilities criteria. This can be achieved through a clarification of the criteria used to describe learning disability.

1. **That the criteria used to define disabilities is expanded and a clarification of learning disabilities be included in this definition.**

In addition to this, the differentiation between levels of handicap under the disabilities criteria is too broad. In prescribing broad criteria to define student's disability related needs, there is a de-emphasis on individual diagnoses. The Federation approves of a more individualised approach to special needs.

2. **That the criteria remain flexible and that an individual approach to disability assessment is upheld.**

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

In schools where a disabilities policy is put into practice, parents are valued members of a child's educational assessment. The learning support team consists of a school counsellor, principal and/or nominee, teacher/support teacher, parent/carer as well as qualified health professionals if appropriate. This team makes a consensual decision about the needs of the student at hand. This kind of system proves to be a fair way of involving all relevant parties in the process of assessing a student's disability related needs. However, this process is not consistent across all New South Wales schools and there is variability in its application. As well as this, the process is not consistently monitored in the long term in the form of an individual management plan.

The Federation has anecdotal evidence to suggest that students disability related needs are not being assessed adequately in schools. Often diagnoses are left to parents, incurring large medical costs upon families. This situation is inadequate. The Federation believes that installing a proper disability assessment plan is indispensable to students with disabilities. It is indispensable because schools should be responsible for meeting the needs of all students. Identification of a student's disability is only the first step. This needs to be followed through with an assessment in consultation with all relevant parties, a diagnosis on the part of qualified health professionals and finally the development of individual management plans on the part of teachers. The Federation acknowledges that this is a costly process, but that this process is a measure that must be delivered to afford students with learning and other disabilities educational opportunities. We see these measures as educational investments that will improve student's educational outcomes and also decrease behavioural problems.

In improving the current state of disability assessment, better provision of qualified health professionals is necessary. Those therapy services that are for some families, difficult to access, need to be more readily available on site. Speech therapists, physiotherapists and other qualified health professionals need to be consulted in schools and to do this public funding is required. It is important to acknowledge that teachers alone cannot be expected to diagnose children without the appropriate professional support. The Federation sees it as imperative that the network between teachers, parents, qualified health professionals and teacher's aides, teacher aide and STLDs is improved.

3. **That access to qualified health professionals be made available on site across all public schools. Therapeutic services should be initiated through a bilateral strategy between the Department of Health and Aged Care and the Department of Education, Science and Training.**
4. **That the Department of Education, Science and Training fund the NSW Department of Education and Training to take individual case management as part of its duties through the establishment of education management plans.**
5. **That early intervention strategies be explored to assist in the identification of students with learning and/or other disabilities.**

Communication Problems between the School and its Community

A further barrier to disability assessment is the fact that schools can reject parent's feedback and sit within rigid interpretations of certain disabilities. The Federation receives regular complaints from parents concerning their children's Attention Deficit Syndrome disorder and the demands in some schools to increase ADSD sufferers' Ritalin intake and demands that these students bear all responsibility for manifestations of their disorder. Conflict between parents and schools, seen as a consequence of inappropriate disability assessment awaits resolution.

The Federation's solution to this is to develop the appeals panel so that communication regarding disabilities is improved. It is the opinion of Federation that communication is required beyond discussion with the Principal to a level where experts, the school and parents themselves can collaboratively create solutions to a child's disability needs. This process should be enshrined in all schools disabilities policies.

Part of the rationale behind improving communication channels is also associated with the current lack of planning and co-ordination in assessing disability. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the transition between primary and high school is not always successful. Many parents have brought this to the Federation's attention. According to one parent, communication was so appalling that she had not been provided access to her child's individual educational assessment. If this inquiry reveals that this is a widespread situation, then communication between parents and the school needs improvement across all New South Wales schools. Significantly enhanced school based T&D would be needed to achieve this.

- 6. That disability assessment panels are consistently applied across all public schools and that an appeals mechanism is formally set in place. These panels should include the following participants: parent, school counsellor, district general officer, principal, teacher, teacher's aide and qualified health professionals.**

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

As treatment of children's disabilities is often left to parents, the issue of a child's access to remediation services is associated with parental empowerment. For those parents who have the resources to draw from, their child's access to therapeutic services is not a problem. However when this is not the case, the child is at a severe disadvantage. The Federation sees this as an equity issue that needs to be worked out at the national level in the form of a Federal disabilities strategy.

The Federation would like to see a targeted funding strategy initiated at the Federal level. Students with disabilities require a commitment at the national level that incorporates health, education and welfare and this is particularly important to meet the needs of those at risk families.

On the topic of parental empowerment,

Federation policy states that,

*'8.9 Federation supports the need for parents and families of children with special educational needs to gain access to education, training and development programs which will assist them to share more directly in the education of their child.'*¹

Federation sees involving parents as a way of not only increasing awareness of a child's disability but also, engaging parents in their child's education. Provided public funding is targeted at the national level for remediation and other services, the involvement of parents for at risk students is vital to enabling these students with opportunities.

7 That Federal funding be targeted at each of the following groups:

Students with disabilities from

- **low socio-economic,**
- **non-English speaking,**
- **Indigenous backgrounds and from**
- **rural and remote areas.**

8 That parents are offered access to participate at no cost in training and development programs regarding student's disabilities.

iv) the effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs,

It is well recognised that early intervention improves a child's educational opportunities. It is therefore crucial to improve our early childhood services to reflect the priority of children receiving remediation as early as possible. Discovering and resolving difficulties beyond kindergarten is often too late. However, delayed identification and/or remediation of students with disabilities can be improved by better and more accessible early intervention programs as well as better communication between ECHS, preschool and primary school. The current information transfer problems between early childhood health services and formal schooling raise issues for the educational planning of special needs students. It is imperative that our public health records system is improved to serve the needs of children with learning and other disabilities. For students with disabilities, educational planning is vital to their success at school and this can be assisted by targeting funding at the 0-5 age group.

One of the most achievable strategies to improve early identification is to make publicly funded pre-schools available across the country. Another way of addressing this issue is to improve coordination between early childhood health services and preschool and primary school. This would facilitate ongoing communication of a child's needs through records shared between ECHS, preschool, primary school and highschool.

9 That educational planning for students with disabilities is improved with enhanced communication between ECHS, Preschool and Primary School.

10 That the Federal government publicly fund preschools be initiated in all state schools under the direction of the Department of Education, Science and Training.

¹ Federation Policy, Section 8 Education for Special Needs, B Children with Disabilities- Special Education

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

The Federation sees the funding and support in the public sector as inadequate. The effectiveness of the disabilities framework in schools is far from optimum without the requisite funding and support. One of the barriers to the disabilities framework is the lack of professional development amongst teachers. The Federation believes that increasing teachers' professional skills is vital to ensuring that students are served properly in their schools. This requires a national commitment.

On the whole, programs for learning disabilities require a massive injection in funding. This is in preference to later funding correctional measures at far greater costs to communities and individuals, socially and financially. The current eligibility criteria for literacy funding is determined by the ELLA test. This test highlights the limited funding available to those with learning disabilities. The ELLA test only services a limited proportion of the students that may require remediation. It is an anomaly that some students are falling through the net and the Federation believes that increased funding is necessary to more fully service those students with learning disabilities.

- 11 That funding is directed toward improving access to disability programs. Funding should be targeted in the following areas; improving the professional expertise for teachers and teacher's aides, provision of qualified health professionals and extra funding support for programs.**

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

Federation policy makes the following comments in regard to integration,

'8.21 With respect to integration of students with disabilities in regular schools and classes, Federation recommends that:

- (a) government funding should be increased proportionally with the increasing demand for this service in government schools and that this funding should then be maintained for as long as it is required;*
- (b) the Department of Education and Training should ensure that where a child is enrolled in a mainstream school with integration funding, that funding be provided for each child enrolled in mainstream school and continues for the duration of that enrolment unless it can be demonstrated that such support is no longer needed;*
- (c) present and future plans by the Department of Education and Training and its Regions be made known to both professionals and parents and that parent representatives be involved at all stages of planning;*
- (d) children have the right to enrol at their local school with the aim of placing them in the least restrictive and most advantageous educational environment;*
- (e) where necessary, additional resources are allocated to support enrolment in the neighbourhood school;*
- (f) where the needs of the child cannot be met at the neighbourhood school, provision should be made for movement from one Special Education service delivery model to another*

- (g) *as integration develops and the expertise in Schools for Specific Purposes disperses, new staffing formula be implemented whereby isolated classes, individuals and their teachers, aides and parents are supported by a Head Teacher based at one particular school in that district or Cluster.*
- (h) *there be flexibility to allow the interchange of teachers between schools in a district or cluster in order that students in any one class do not have the same teachers for many years;*
- (i) *integration should be planned, ie. the host school environment including physical and other resources, teachers, parents and pupils (both those with disabilities to be integrated and those of the host school) should be prepared before integration takes place;*
- (j) *regional and Cluster support be given to the host school in the preparation of resources, policy-making, programs and curriculum design;*
- (k) *once a class is established, ongoing adaptation of programs should provide for further integration so that individual needs are served to benefit the students with special needs and other children at the school; and*
- (l) *all students and classes with special needs in a regular school must be an integral part of that school.*²

General Comments

The Federation supports the NSW Integration Program. It is the Federation's belief that this program has not received adequate funding to make substantive change. Unfortunately the major obstacle to the success of this strategy is the lack of support amongst some teachers. Integration as a concept works well, but can not be actualised without teachers' willingness and ability to carry it out in the class room.

If teachers are not trained and willing to recognise that children may require coloured print to read, or how to handle behavioural issues associated with integration, then the program is far from successful. Parents across the state have vented their concerns in regard to integration. Students in integrated class rooms are often considered as behavioural difficulties and in fact do not really experience the benefits of 'integration' and frequently face punishment for symptoms of their disability. We believe that this culture needs to change and can be changed through a massive funding injection into teacher professional development. This kind of strategy is required to ensure the feasibility of disabilities programs.

The Federation's consultation with parents across the state reveals that integration is not being systematically applied in all schools. It is our concern that integration is not being taken seriously, and that the success of the program often relies on Principals' interest in disability issues. The program must be active in providing solutions for students with disabilities.

vii) teacher training and professional development, and

Federation policy makes the following comments on teacher training and professional development;

'8B (ii)

² *Federation Policy, Section 8 Education for Special Needs, B Children with Disabilities- Special Education*

Every Classroom teacher must have the training, either through pre-service or inservice, to recognise common symptoms of dysfunctions or disabilities that may impede a student's learning. All teachers should be required to alert parents when they observe such indicators.

8.11 Federation advocates the continued provision of Special Education teacher education programs and identifiable funding for such programs at both pre-service and in-service stages to prepare teachers to better meet the special educational needs of children. With this in mind, Federation encourages and supports the careful monitoring of teacher education programs so that quality and content is assured. Trainee teachers should be screened as to their suitability, in terms of attitudes and expectations, to work in the field of Special Education.

8.12 Federation believes it is essential that compulsory units in Special Education be included in all accredited pre-service teacher education courses at early childhood, primary and post-primary levels. The content of such courses should provide students teachers with all of the following:

(a) basic knowledge of the developmental and learning difficulties and learning disabilities which will be encountered by teachers in the regular classroom at pre-school, primary and secondary levels;

(b) assessment and teaching strategies related to specific development and learning difficulties and learning disabilities and knowledge of access to and use of support services such as Resource Teachers, School Counsellors, and interdisciplinary services; and

(c) observational techniques and practicum with specific experiences in implementing programs for children with learning difficulties and learning disabilities and/or behavioural problems within the regular classroom.

8.13 Before being accepted to work with children with disabilities, therapists, aides and volunteers must be screened to assess their attitudes and expectations to determine their suitability to work in this field of education. Once suitability is established, in-service training should begin.³

In accordance with the Ramsey Review of teacher education, the Federation acknowledges the urgent need to increase levels of professional development in all levels in education. The mandatory completion of one special education subject in a university course is an improvement that's been won. However teachers still require access to further professional development to move outside of a text book understanding of special needs.

The costs, quality and access to professional development are issues that are highly contentious in education circles. However it is the opinion of Federation, that a serious commitment to teacher professional development is required in this area. This should not be at the discretion of schools' preferences or perceived priorities. Schools require experts in their communities to create a positive and responsive learning environment, especially in the delivery of individual educational assessments, for those students with disabilities. Teachers need to collaboratively work together with both teacher aides and teacher special aides. To do this a degree of professional expertise is required.

Furthermore teachers require incentives to become involved in special education. Special education is not considered to be a career move for teachers, there is no formal recognition of their work and a high degree of professional isolation. If the disabilities policy is to work properly in schools, then teachers need to be valued for their labour in this area.

12 That the Federal Government funds teacher professional development in special education as a priority funding area.

³ Federation Policy, Section 8 Education for Special Needs, B Children with Disabilities- Special Education

The Federation is also concerned about the inconsistent calibre of the teacher aides in schools. A general view of the situation is that teacher aides employment is often ad hoc, unstable and without professional qualifications they do not receive the respect that they deserve. The Federation sees solutions to these problems as starting at lifting the qualifications framework for teacher aides, teacher aide special and STLDs. In theory these roles are meant to support teachers and communication is to enable the development of solutions for disability issues. In practice however, this does not occur smoothly in all cases.

- 13 That the qualifications framework for teacher aides, teacher aide special and STLDs be evaluated to utilize the professional knowledge base of these roles.**

At the most fundamental level, pedagogies are instrumental in affecting a student's ability to learn. The Federation believes that research needs to be conducted to establish the links between teaching methods, learning styles and learning difficulties. This kind of research will improve the ability of professional development programs to deliver for students.

- 14 That research is conducted into the relationships between teaching methods, learning styles and learning difficulties.**

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

The *Disability Discrimination Act 1997* is reinforced by external affairs powers including the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Right*. The Australian government's ratification of the *United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child* also places a legal obligation upon the Federal government to act in a child's best interest. These external affairs conventions sit in conjunction with the *Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act (1992)*. The legal implications of these Commonwealth legislation and international treaties make it both a legal and moral obligation to implement the ratified conventions. It is within this context that the Federation demands action at the Federal level.

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

The Federation sees it as crucial that the Federal government make a national commitment to this issue. Cost factors outstrip the abilities of states and territories to make substantive change to the situation for those students with disabilities. Without the pressure of funding the everyday running of schools, it is not unreasonable to expect federal funding to sustain a policy initiative of national significance.

- 15 That a Federal disability strategy be initiated that targets funding to the states and territories.**