

NSW FEDERATION OF SCHOOL COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS Inc.

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities

The NSW Federation of School Community Organisations (FOSCO) is a peak state school parent organisation with a primary interest in the early years of schooling. Affiliates are infant and primary school parent clubs throughout NSW. FOSCO's policy is decided each year at Annual Conference to which each club is entitled to send delegates. An Executive is responsible for implementing policy and carrying out administrative and representative functions of the organisation.

We welcome the opportunity to make a written submission to the Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities. The factors which affect the education of our children are of prime importance to us so we have a vital interest in this inquiry. We will focus our comments on factors affecting the early years of schooling as these are the specific concern of FOSCO and it is our belief that they are the most important years in the development of our children into young adults.

The following are extracts from our Policy on Students with Disabilities or Learning Difficulties:

F2 CHILDREN WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITY AND LEARNING DIFFICULTY - POLICY

1. Federation believes, following these declarations and in line with NSW legislation, that discrimination on the grounds of disability is an offence, that all children with disabilities should be educated, that this education should be in the most normal setting feasible and that integration within the neighbourhood school be the aim.
2. Special schools should be retained where total integration into the neighbourhood school is not in the best interests of the child.
3. The involvement of the Department of Education and Training should commence from the time of diagnosis of a problem and the individual nature of the problem should be reflected in program planning for each child.
4. Registers of persons with disabilities should be used to determine the need and make provision for future facilities for all exceptional children. Following diagnosis, a person should be appointed to provide continuity of information to parents concerning appropriate services and facilities.
5. Systematic early intervention programs should be provided for all students with disabilities by the Department of Education and Training.
6. Resources must be provided sufficient to establish and maintain ongoing programs and support for each student with a disability enrolled in government schools.
7. Ongoing support and programs to meet the needs of students integrated into regular schools must be provided in such a way that other students are not disadvantaged.
8. The special role of parents in the education of students with disabilities should be acknowledged through the development of a partnership with professionals and provision of information, support and resources to enable them to fulfil this role.
9. Federation believes that positive attitudes should be fostered in the whole school community towards the integration of students with disabilities.
10. All teachers should have pre-service and inservice training to assist with the integration of students with disabilities into regular classes. Specific assistance should also be provided to teachers prior to or immediately following the integration of a student into their class.

C2 EARLY INTERVENTION - POLICY

1. Federation recognises the importance of early identification of children with developmental disability and learning difficulty and that early intervention programs are vital if these children are to have the foundation experiences essential for future learning.
2. Parents' vital role in the early education of children with disabilities must be supported by services to the home environment as well as access to and participation in early intervention programs.
3. Multidisciplinary teams should be available to assess all young children with developmental disability and learning difficulty from the time of identification of a problem and to plan individual educational programs as a result of the assessment.
4. Parents must be fully consulted about and involved in all stages of assessment, planning and placement for their

child with developmental disability or learning difficulty.

5. Integration of children into mainstream settings should begin prior to school so that the basis of peer acceptance on school entry is established.

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 Department of Education and Training (DET) in NSW has separated students with disabilities from those with learning difficulties for the purposes of funding. This is because they consider that with good teaching learning difficulties can be overcome but a disability stays with the student permanently thus requiring ongoing funding support. There is currently an inquiry into the provision of resources and funding for students with learning difficulties within NSW state schools. There are Support Teachers (Learning Difficulties) employed to assist classroom teachers with students with learning difficulties but FOSCO believes, as do many other concerned groups, that the number is inadequate to meet needs. All syllabus documents for primary students in NSW give advice to classroom teachers on teaching students with learning difficulties.

The NSW Department of Education and Training has developed a funding and training program called 'Learning Together' for all students with a severe or moderate disability who are mainstreamed in government schools.

They have also had a review of staffing of 'Schools for Specific Purposes' and of special 'Units within government schools' conducted by George Comino, the recommendations from which are currently being trialled to see if they have improved the fairness of distribution of staff and if the new measures of level of disabilities according to educational need translate reliably into practice.

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

In NSW an 'instrument' was developed by DET in 1997 to assist in the allocation of funds to support students with disabilities enrolled in mainstream classes. This was used by the University of Newcastle to produce a new ascertainment instrument for assessing the needs of students with disabilities in mainstream classes which was introduced in 2000 and has been refined each year it has been in place. This takes into account the physical, social and educational needs of each individual student and is used as the basis for annual funding. It seems to be a fairer and more accurate way of trying to meet needs than the previous method used. Limitations in total funding still mean that students with disabilities in state schools do not have all their needs met adequately.

This instrument was also used as a basis for developing the assessment of need for the trial of the Comino Review staffing recommendations and it will be interesting to see if comparisons of these two assessments will be part of its evaluation.

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

These areas have all been taken into consideration in the 'Learning Together' program but it is too early to judge whether there has been any improvement in meeting their needs. FOSCO, in representing all parents, on committees involved in provision for students from low socio-economic backgrounds, ESL programs, Indigenous and rural students, always tries to draw attention to the particular needs of students with disabilities. Often however there is a feeling that the special education programs like 'Learning Together' and the general State Integration Program will look after these students and other programs within education systems need not make special provision for the particular needs of these students. This may be mainly the result of working in such a big system.

iv) the effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs,

As FOSCO is only involved with school-aged children and those in attached government pre-schools, we do not have first hand knowledge of many of the early intervention programs in operation in NSW. However, our belief is that the sooner an intervention program is started the better the outcomes for the child.

One problem within the school system is that some parents will not seek help before school entry or that they simply do not recognise that there is a problem with their child. This causes difficulties when the child is enrolled within the state system without any prior provision for funding assistance. This is not necessarily due to problems within the agencies involved before entry to school as they don't seem to access these services either.

Of the students with disabilities that have been involved in early intervention programs the parents have found the transition to school, especially mainstream, to be easier and that the child with a disability settles in quickly to the routine of school life.

A problem seems to be that the early intervention programs are not established equitably across the state of NSW. There has been an inquiry into Early Intervention in NSW by Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues and the report from this inquiry is Foundations for Learning: A new vision for New South Wales? Issues Paper 4, March, 2002.

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

FOSCO can only comment on the state school system in NSW where the state government has certainly greatly increased the funding, especially for staffing, over the past five years. They have reviewed and tried to put into place a fairer system of funding allocation while still limited by the total available. There has also been a very large increase in the amount spent on building modifications, such as lifts, toilets and other needs for students with physical disabilities.

The Department of Education and Training in NSW is working to ensure that all students are provided for in state schools. There are still many problems but these are being dealt with as they arise. FOSCO believes the state department and government are doing the best they can with genuine concern to meet the needs of all students. As always however, what is done is never enough. State funding is still limited, and Commonwealth funds have not increased to meet the huge increase in students with disabilities integrated into mainstream schools. These are the Australians of the future and to the FOSCO Executive the Commonwealth appears to have education as a low priority. Because of their non-discriminatory policies, State schools do cater for a higher proportion of students with disabilities and learning difficulties than non-government schools. Of these students with special needs, those with a mild disability and /or learning difficulties are of a higher proportion than those students with a severe or moderate disability. Due

to this the Department of Education and Training is currently having an inquiry into how these students can be better provided for within the current education budget.

FOSCO has in the past raised concerns about the NSW DET's policy on transport of students with disabilities to and from school as we believed it was discriminatory in that it required parents to provide transport unless they could give good reason why they are unable to do so. We recognise that there is a huge cost involved in transporting those students unable to access and use public transport in the usual way that other students do. However, while able students attending private schools at long distances from their homes are fully funded to use public transport, FOSCO believes that all students with disabilities that make use of public transport impossible, should be provided with bus or taxi transport as appropriate, funded by the government. There should not be an expectation made of parents of students with disabilities, that they will provide transport for their children.

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

As mentioned before the Department of Education and Training has put into place the 'Learning Together' program to fund students with disabilities within the mainstream. Together with the Board of Studies there has been provision in syllabus documents to provide for curriculum access of students with disabilities. The Board of Studies has put together a Life Skills Program which will allow a student with disabilities to complete their Higher School Certificate.

DET also have in place the Early Learning Program for students with learning difficulties and such programs as Reading Recovery but these are not automatically provided in every government primary school as funding does not allow this.

vii) teacher training and professional development,

Within the school system the Department of Education and Training has developed a program for Teachers Aide Specials that can be accessed through TAFE. They are also putting in place training and development for current classroom mainstream teachers through the Learning Together program but this is still not fully functional due to lack of funds.

University Training

Special Education Training may still be an elective not a compulsory subject for trainee teachers and it may not be up-to-date with current practice in early intervention programs and research and/or not a practical program for teachers. All new teachers employed in state schools are required to have undertaken some special education training. FOSCO believes that there has probably been no evaluation of how adequate or up-to-date current courses offered are, so there probably should be a survey done. All trainee teachers need training in providing curriculum appropriate lessons for students with disabilities especially within a mainstream setting and current teaching staff need professional development to allow them to support these students appropriately.

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

As a parent group we can only say that it is discriminatory not to ensure that a student with a disability is provided with schooling that will meet their educational needs. The Department in NSW has embraced the Disability Action Plan based on current legislation and is doing everything it can within the restraints of funding made available by governments.

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

FOSCO believes, as with all areas aiming to achieve equity in educational provision, that the Commonwealth, states and territories should share the responsibility for funding these students. Our main concern is that all governments increase funding to recognise the need for better provision and to keep up with the increase in the number of students integrated into mainstream schools. FOSCO believes that parents should have the right to enrol their child with a disability in a mainstream class if it is in the best interests of the child and that this will often be the case. Parents should have the choice for their children to be educated in a separate setting if they wish.

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