

Lutheran Education Australia

Submission to Senate Inquiry into the education of students with disabilities made on behalf of the schools and systems operated by the Lutheran Church of Australia.

1. Lutheran schools and the education of students with disabilities

1.1 The Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA) through Lutheran Education Australia (LEA) operates 82 primary and secondary schools and 28 early childhood centres, educating some 29,000 students. These schools are under the control of, and administered by, three systems. There are Lutheran schools in each state. Lutheran schools intentionally provide for students from a wide range of backgrounds, including students with disabilities.

1.2 Through both policy and practice LEA has expressed and fostered a vital interest in the learning needs of students with disabilities. The official statements of the church and LEA's own policies reflect a commitment to inclusiveness in its schools and systems. This is illustrated as follows:

(a) LCA and Its Schools statement

This statement calls for the Lutheran school to respond to the needs of students and to develop *their God-given abilities as fully as possible within the resource limits of the school community.*

(b) LCA 1997 General Synod resolution

Learning difficulty needs

Resolved that 'learning difficulty needs' be a high priority in the mission and ministry of Lutheran schooling in the LCA.

1.3 Students with disabilities, including learning disabilities and difficulties, enrolled in Lutheran schools reflect a wide range of needs. The following categories of need in Lutheran schools are noted and the numbers of students in them are then identified:

(a) Students with disabilities who meet the Commonwealth Census definitions

In this category a student with a disability is defined as one: 'who is attending a government or non-government school and who has been assessed by a person with relevant qualifications as having intellectual, sensory, physical, social/emotional or multiple impairments to a degree that satisfies the criteria for enrolment in special education services or programs provided by the government of the state or territory in which the school or centre is located' (DEST Quadrennial Administrative Guidelines).

These students attract funding assistance from both Commonwealth and State governments.

- (b) Students with learning difficulties
We define these as students with learning difficulties and disabilities, who have been assessed and documented but do not qualify for special funding from the Commonwealth. We further define this group as functioning in numeracy and/or literacy at least two years below their age level. Their rate of learning and learning styles significantly reduces their ability to learn at the same rate as their peers. A task force established by Lutheran Education Australia estimates that the number of students in this area is 10-15% of enrolments, or 2,900-4,300 students.
- (c) English as a Second Language (ESL) students and indigenous Australian students are others who may experience learning difficulties. Support is received from the Commonwealth to enable a program that is responsive to their needs. It is sometimes difficult to identify learning disabilities with ELS and indigenous students as it can be masked by other issues, such as the challenge of learning English.
- (d) Other learning disabilities not included in the definitions above where students have significant learning challenges need also to be noted.
- Psychiatric related disabilities, eg, anorexia, anxiety, depression
 - Acquired disability, eg, accident resulting in brain damage, loss of limb
 - Chronic illness, eg, oncology, meningococcal disease
 - Behavioural/social emotional – this category is vast and varied and dealing with these students can be very resource intensive
- It is not clear how many students are in these categories, but they present with challenges to learning.
- (e) In summary the following table describes the extent of LEA students receiving support from government under various programs:

State	Total enrolment	Students with disabilities	ESL	Indigenous
Queensland	12235	80	309	104
South Australia	8466	315.6	178	180
Northern Territory	823	30.6	223	255.6
Western Australia	709	5	3	0
Victoria	3000	23.6	12	0
New South Wales	973	13	5	1
Tasmania	51	1	0	0
Total	26257	468.8	730	540.6

[Source: DETYA Census August 2001.

Note: These figures include enrolments in schools only and do not include children attending early childhood centres]

- 1.4 Overall the schools of Lutheran Education Australia overtly espouse a Christian philosophy and a commitment to 'bear one another's burdens'. Thus a strong emphasis is placed on the pastoral care of students and attention to individual differences and needs. Through the commitment and care of our teachers who invariably 'go the extra mile', we endeavour to provide for the educational needs of these students as best we can although resources may be limited.

We believe that this strong commitment to the pastoral care of students has resulted in an increase in enrolments of students with disabilities and learning difficulties. Lutheran schools are family communities and, having enrolled one child in a school, parents are keen to enrol other siblings regardless of their learning ability or disability. In addition some parents deliberately seek a Christian education for their children regardless of the learning ability of their child. They want the right of choice in education - no matter what the child's ability may be.

Consequently our schools find themselves with increasing numbers of students with learning disabilities as noted above and this has created some genuine issues for us. Our schools struggle to provide the educational programs best suited to students with special needs within the guidelines of social justice and equity policies.

- (a) There are moral and ethical dilemmas for administrators who have to stretch the limited finances available to the school to develop appropriate programs. Parents often need to make extra commitments financially, emotionally and in time to enable a child with a disability to attend a Lutheran school.
- (b) There is also the stress placed upon teachers as they cope with the additional pressures associated with the education of the growing numbers of students with disabilities within the mainstream classroom. There are new skills and management strategies to be learnt in dealing with additional support personnel.
- (c) Distress is evident to both parents and staff when the educational needs of the students are unable to be met, because of undue hardship to the school community or the realisation that the school environment is unable to meet the needs of the student. In other cases questions of safety may lead to the same realisation.

2. Response to issues and definitions raised in the Terms of Reference

2.1 The criteria used to define disability and to differentiate between levels of handicap

It seems that each state sets its own criteria to define levels of disability, and this creates a perceived inequitable distribution of Commonwealth funds. Since Commonwealth funds are vital to enable the development of equitable programs for students with disabilities it is important that there are clear national definitions for levels of handicap.

2.2 The accuracy with which students' disability related needs are being assessed

Concerns exist relating to the reliability and accuracy of assessment of students. Some of our schools have experienced difficulty in accessing professionals and allied health agencies to assist in the assessment of students. This is especially so because of distance and related costs. Students in non-government schools may be assessed by a professional who is often untrained in the criteria, eligibility process or benchmarks for access to Commonwealth funding. There is often a significant time lag from initial concern through assessment, diagnosis and documentation to schools. Students who move from school to school either inter or intra state experience difficulty with consistency and accuracy of assessments when the assessment or diagnosis is required to access funding.

The increasing demand for services from all educational sectors has led to a decrease in access to allied health professionals in all areas of disability, particularly in the early years when diagnosis and early assessment are paramount to the success or failure of students. Student needs that are perceived to be developmental in nature can manifest themselves into lifelong learning difficulties and behavioural problems if appropriate diagnosis and intervention is not applied in the early years of schooling. Thus the need for accurate, prompt and consistent assessments.

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

- a) Low socio-economic
Some parents and families find the cost of assessment, diagnosis and accessing support services financially onerous. Our observations are that those without adequate personal finances are significantly disadvantaged.
- b) ESL – Our experience in this area is that adequate support has been established since the Commonwealth program is adequately funded and the guidelines, levels and eligibility for funding are clearly defined. This could become a benchmark for other areas of disability funding.
- c) Indigenous background
Whilst there is significant government funding for literacy and numeracy programs for indigenous students, those with learning disabilities often are not identified in the early stages of their education. This may be a result of cultural differences or health issues. Ongoing enrolment and attendance difficulties compound the issue and this invariably impacts on access to support for these students.
- d) Rural and remote – Some of our rural schools have accessed support from Commonwealth Government Non-Government Centre Support Programs. Under this program funding is provided to non-government organisations who support students with special needs by providing services such as assessments, therapy and visiting teacher consultations. Examples of these organisations are the Crippled Children's Association, Cerebral Palsy Association, etc. Our rural

schools are sometimes challenged by time, cost and distance to access assessments or special intervention programs.

At the school level the availability and cost of appropriate professional development and the cost for travel, courses and accommodation can pose a problem. Rural schools are increasingly finding it difficult to access professional development for specialist support staff as time and distance together with the costs associated with travel adds extra financial responsibilities on schools.

2.4 The effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs

In South Australia the reading recovery program has been implemented in most schools except for smaller remote schools. In Queensland many schools have been able to implement intervention programs, with the exception of some smaller remote schools. Programs can be implemented where schools are able to fund them from their own resources. The Commonwealth's push for early literacy and numeracy testing is well supported and provides some assistance in this area. However some programs are funded for limited periods of time and this creates difficulty for some schools to sustain the programs for the long term.

There is a need for more specific training for teachers in early intervention assessment and implementation programs. Evidence is that the benchmarking at year 3, 5 and 7 levels will become an effective assessment tool.

2.5 Access to and adequacy of funding and support in both the public and private sectors

We believe strongly that students with disabilities, who attend our schools, are disadvantaged compared to those who attend government schools. Although it is not clear how much State governments spend on students with severe disabilities, we estimate it to be in the order of \$20,000 - \$25,000 per student. This is based on the amount that we believe that we need to spend on students with similar learning disabilities. Yet in our schools the amount received from government, and this varies from state to state, ranges from \$3000 to \$6000 per student. The difference is made up through fees and generous allocations from school budgets.

Furthermore there is limited and inconsistent access to guidance officers, advisory visiting teachers and allied health professionals (unless the student's disability is hearing impaired, visually impaired or physically impaired, where access to funding seems to be much easier and for this we are grateful). The Commonwealth Targeted Funding Program is a vital source of funds for supporting the education of students with disabilities. However, the quantum of funds allocated each year has increased modestly compared with the growth in the number of students in need of assistance.

2.6 The nature, extent and funding of programs that provide for full or partial learning opportunities with mainstream students

Our schools have developed many and varied programs to cater for the needs of students with disabilities in the mainstream classroom.

This reflects the policy and ethos under which our schools operate, where schools attempt to respond to individual differences. However lack of adequate resources may limit program quality and/or implementation. It is not possible to categorise or generalise nationally.

It is clear that where significant money is available the effectiveness of programs is dramatically increased. We believe that more funds should be directed to students with learning difficulties to assist them to reach benchmark standards. Funding should be available to ensure appropriate resourcing is directed to students' specific needs so that they can better access educational services. Increased support for the implementation of specific focus programs along with specific training for all staff responsible for these students will improve the learning outcomes for these students.

2.7 Teacher training and professional development

There is a need for ongoing training and support of staff. Such training and support should meet the particular needs of students in a specific school setting at a specific time. Too often the training needs of teacher aides, who are used to assist students, are overlooked. They also require support in this regard, as their contribution is crucial. It is also important that support staff understand the ethos of the particular school. There is a need for all staff, not just the specific learning support staff, to be trained in the meaning of inclusive education and the specialised needs of students with disabilities. Teacher education courses at universities should give greater attention to programs to assist students in preparing for this. A greater range of courses is required for support staff.

2.8 The legal implications and resources demands of current Commonwealth and state and territory legislation

The 1992 Discrimination Act imposes significant responsibility on schools and the Disability Standards for Education being developed through MCEETYA have accentuated this issue. As a result schools are bearing significant costs themselves in providing an environment that is safe and accessible. Schools are often faced with decisions relating to equitable distribution of resources, eg, \$200,000 to provide a wheelchair lift for one child. Decisions to undertake such projects impact upon the broader educational programs in the school.

There is also continued concern about legal implications and litigation. Accountability requires that information (both verbal and written) be documented. Some teachers are rightly concerned about future litigation issues, and are seeking advice in this area. Added to this is the issue relating to the Privacy Act and the amount of information that can be shared within the school. Enrolment policies need to be written in a way that reflects the ethos of the school as well as the requirements of the Act. Making enrolment decisions has become an increasingly complex process for administrators.

2.9 The proper role of the Commonwealth and states and territories in supporting the education of students with disabilities

There is a need for the Commonwealth to provide national leadership in the development of national standards and definitions in the same way as it acted through MCEETYA to develop Disability Standards for Education. These Standards have imposed significant responsibility on schools, which we want to take up in the interests of our students. However there are significant resource implications and additional funding needs to follow.

State and territory governments have particular responsibility for providing education for students with disabilities in their jurisdiction. In addition they need to work together with the Commonwealth to ensure that student with disabilities in non-government schools have access to appropriate resources. States should not be seen to be saving money when a child with a disability transfers from a state school to a non-government school.

With both Commonwealth and state governments fulfilling clearly defined responsibilities students with disabilities will have access to an education that meets their needs. Their parents will have a reasonable choice in education – as do other parents.

3. Recommendations

Recommendation One

That the Commonwealth through MCEETYA move urgently to have developed:

- national definitions of disability
- criteria for levels of disability
- documentation to enable the uniform interpretation across states and territories of these definitions and criteria.

Recommendation Two

That a mechanism be established to determine an appropriate methodology for identifying the exact cost of educating students with disabilities in government schools and this cost be reported annually.

Recommendation Three

That the principle be established that students with severe learning disability needs (as defined in Recommendation One) receive the same amount of support from government regardless of the school sector in which they are enrolled. The progressive implementation of this should be determined through appropriate Commonwealth/State government processes.

Recommendation Four

That in determining funding needs special attention be given to:

- a) meeting the assessment costs needed to gain funding which is presently met either by school or parents
- b) students with other learning disabilities not included in other definitions such as psychiatric, acquired disability, chronic illness, or behavioural/social or emotional needs

Recommendation Five

That equitable access for staffing, funding and support services be developed to cater for rural and remote schools.

Recommendation Six

That teacher education courses include a compulsory unit on the education of students with disabilities to ensure teachers develop the skills and strategies to cater for students with disabilities in the mainstream classroom.

Recommendation Seven

That adequate support services (eg, behaviour management teams, counselling, teacher aide time, mental health services, etc) be made available to those students, teachers and families who are identified as 'at risk' to avoid the potential of ongoing and long-term stress and distress related issues.

Recommendation Eight

That a process be implemented to identify the significant numbers of students with a learning difficulty/disability (similar to ESL Band Scales) so that they can access numeracy and literacy programs on a fair and equitable basis so that all students have the opportunity of meeting benchmark standards.

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