

Australian Council of State School Organisations

Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities

The Australian Council of State School Organisations represents, and is the national voice of parents who enrol 2.2 million children in Australia's public schools. It has eleven affiliated state based organisations. Some represent the interests of parents clubs and associations, and others have responsibility for supporting members of school governing bodies. ACSSO has a proud record of formulating policies designed to ensure that all children's needs are met in our public schools, and in particular, the needs of disadvantaged groups are regarded as a high priority.

- In relation to identification criteria, ACSSO believes that the focus should be on what a student can actually do, not on the label attached to the disability.
- Most disabilities are on a spectrum, and any criterion that regards all children with the same disability as being equal in need is inadequate.
- In several states, children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, receive fixed levels of funding support, without differentiation according to the severity of the disorder. This can result in considerable pressure on medical practitioners by the education resource providers to not reach a diagnosis of ASD.
- Extra support in the early years of schooling is particularly important in relation to those disabilities that will act as a barrier to learning.
- There is some evidence that the range of disability represented in non-government schools is much more limited than in government schools. It would appear that higher functioning students are more likely to be enrolled in non-government schools, yet these schools or systems are able to claim Commonwealth funding equal to the public systems for these children.
- One of the tensions experienced in this area relates to the fact that disability support groups tend to define themselves according to disability type, whilst some identification criteria, we believe rightly, focus on student capability.
- There are inconsistent policies and practices in relation to the identification of needs and level of service provision between state and territory jurisdictions, and between government and non-government schools within the same jurisdiction.
- For example, the NSW Department of Education and Training provides resourcing for one disability only. Multiple disabilities in the one child are not funded. This situation may differ from state to state.
- Inconsistency between states impacts upon family mobility. It should be no more difficult for a family with a child with a disability to pursue employment goals requiring interstate re-location, than a family with a mainstream child.

- Inconsistency can also result in cross border issues, where a neighbouring state or territory is seen to be more generous in its provision of disability services, thereby resulting in a move away from the neighbourhood school in the less generous location.
- ACSSO believes that the entire question of identification criteria needs to be re-visited and in fact broadened. For example, there is a case for including children with ADD or ADHD as having a disability. Not that it is the particular label that should be used, as these disorders like others are on a spectrum. However, if the criterion is related to student capability, there are cases of students with more severe symptoms of attention deficit disorders who would qualify for additional support in our schools.
- In Tasmania, where ADD and ADHD is included as a minor level of disability, funding for these students is being continually diluted due to the increasing number of students being diagnosed with various forms of attention disorder, and the fact that high needs students with other disabilities have first call on the limited funding.
- ACSSO believes that an appropriate role for the Commonwealth would be to sponsor a project to bring greater levels of consistency into the identification policies and practices and resource provision across state and territory jurisdictions, and between government and non-government education authorities.
- Devolution of decision making responsibility to schools may also contribute to an inconsistency in the acceptance of children with disabilities and in the level of support available in different schools. Students and families should have a high level of certainty in relation to their entitlements, that is independent of where they live or the ethos and management of the local school.
- There is some anecdotal evidence that some schools “misuse” their extra resources for special needs students. It is not appropriate for special teachers assistants to be redeployed in roles which do not support the children for whom the resourcing is provided.
- Typically, disability resources are often in short supply and vigorously contested. Where identification criteria are subjective, or un-moderated, the loudest voices often achieve the greatest, if not fairest, levels of resourcing. ACSSO strongly supports the utilisation of advocacy services, especially in those circumstances where parents lack the skills, knowledge or support structures to argue the case for their own children. Equally, we favour good system level moderation processes so that students who may not have the benefit of an advocate or lobby group or who may be in more isolated circumstances are not further disadvantaged.
- Pressure on resources is also applied when parents exercise the maximum level of choice available to them. Whilst ACSSO believes that choice is understandable and should be generally supported, it also recognizes that providing new facilities say for a single child in a school of first choice when another nearby school can already meet the need, can result in a reduction in the total resource pool, and lead to inequities.

- In recognition of the situation described above, and the fact that parents will always want the maximum levels of support for their individual child, ACSSO supports the introduction of an appropriate, independent appeals mechanism in relation to resourcing decisions in each jurisdiction. A well-run appeals system could limit parental recourse to litigation, which could prove extremely expensive in the future.
- An unfortunate by-product of the limits on resourcing evident around the country is the observation that some parents are reluctant to acknowledge learning improvements demonstrated by their children for fear of losing those same resources that have contributed to the changes.
- Support for children with disabilities is invariably focused on the provision of special teacher assistants. This focus tends to distract the arguments away from the specific needs of the individual child, and the needs of professional teaching staff. Both teacher pre-service and in-service training is essential, and predicated on the basis that every teacher in every Australian classroom should be prepared and able to teach children with disabilities.
- Parents must be provided with information on the full range of options available for students with a disability in their area. ACSSO recognises that Special Schools may suit some families, whereas the Integration model suits others. We are concerned that when integration fails, as it has done and will continue to do at times, there may be a push to increase Special School provision and deny parents their choice of model. The fact that integration may be more expensive is not a reason to return to the earlier model.
- A particular problem is evident in rural and remote communities, where the range of services is much more limited for students with disabilities. In particular, it is evident that therapeutic services are very stretched, even in urban areas, but in the country the situation is even worse. Therapists are in short supply, they are difficult to recruit, and often suffer work related “burnout”. To compound matters, there are state based examples of therapy services being provided by several agencies, accompanied by coordination difficulties and different working condition policies.
- In relation to therapy, ACSSO is concerned that attempts are being made by some education departments to camouflage the shortage of therapists by instituting model whereby teachers receive some limited training in therapy. Whilst it is important for teachers and therapists to support one another, we wish to strongly emphasise that teachers are not therapists, just as therapists are not teachers.
- In relation to Special Schools, ACSSO recognises that there are some excellent programs in place that suit those families who choose this model. Notwithstanding this, we believe that Special Schools have a responsibility to organise programs and activities whereby their students come into contact with their mainstream peers from time to time. An example of this is the peer tutoring program between a special school and Year 9 students from a local high school.

Another example is the co-location of a small special school within a secondary college, with a number of integrated classes.

- Whether parents choose an integration model or a special school for their child, it is reasonable to expect that an Individual Education Plan will be developed for their child. The IEP is an important element of special needs education. Unfortunately there is some evidence that the best some children can expect in some integration situations is the support of an aide in a classroom where the teacher has no real understanding of an IEP. This is child-minding, not education.
- Class sizes are already large in most jurisdictions, and there are currently calls to reduce class sizes in the early years, to assist boys and so on. Clearly there is also a case to have policies of smaller classes when children with disabilities are integrated into mainstream classes. Not only do teachers need to be able to spend classroom time with students with disabilities, they also need time to develop the IEP with the teacher aide and parents, and to properly monitor its implementation.
- Clearly the pre-service and in-service training of teachers is a crucial issue. Teacher training institutions should program their courses on the assumption that every teacher will be placed in the position of teaching children with disabilities throughout their career at some time or another. A few hours in a unit devoted to this need is patently inadequate.
- Perhaps this paucity of formal training explains the lack of empathy exhibited by the AEU in at least one Australian state to make student disability an occupational health and safety issue for teachers in its log of claims to improve conditions of service. Children should never be an issue in respect of OH&S. To compound this lack of professional judgement further, the AEU branch in question then complained that it was denied access on privacy grounds to individual student medical records so that it could mount its case to government.
- There is an issue with the lack of appropriate curriculum and assessment materials for students with disabilities. The combination of a good curriculum, readily available materials, skilled teachers and well trained teacher assistants is an important mix in the delivery of appropriate programs for these students.
- Of considerable concern to parents with a child with a disability is the situation in relation to post-school options, which are invariably limited. Whilst probably not directly a concern of this Inquiry, schools need to link with and support the transition arrangements for such children in the same way that they support mainstream transition options.
- Finally, ACSSO is concerned at inequities in resource provision between the government and non-government sectors. It has been demonstrated that in general, non-government schools do not enrol either the same proportion of disabled students or students with the same range of disability as their government cousins. Yet an assumption in the funding model is that these factors are the same between the sectors. In other words, Federal government funding for students with disabilities is being utilized in the mainstream in non-government schools.

ACSSO believes that the funding model should be adjusted accordingly to accommodate this disparity.

- A copy of the ACSSO policy on Students with Disabilities is appended

Rob McConchie
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Australian Council of State School Organisations

APPENDIX

ACSSO POLICY

E.4 STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

PREMISE

1. All of the human family, without distinction of any kind, have equal and inalienable rights of human dignity and freedom and rights to education and training to enable development of their abilities to their fullest potential.

E.4 POLICY

E.4.1 ACSSO asserts:

- (a) the right of every child with physical, intellectual or social disability to the education, treatment and care required by his/her particular condition and to attend the educational setting of his/her choice.
- (b) Governments have an obligation to provide free education in government schools for all children. All children have the right to schooling which enables them to recognise and develop their aptitudes. They should learn the skills needed to use their talents, and helped and encouraged to find ways to apply their talents and skills in personally fulfilling ways.
- (c) The individual needs of students with disabilities must be met by a range of different services expressed through appropriate and well planned curricula, programs and environments conducted by sensitive and well trained personnel in conjunction with parents and families. All people working in the field of Special Education must have an understanding of, and commitment to, the concept that every individual's role in society is valued.

E.4.2 With respect to integration of students with disabilities in mainstream settings, ACSSO asserts that:

- (a) government funding must be increased proportionally with the increasing demand for this service and that this funding should then be maintained for as long as required, ie for the duration of the student's enrolment, unless it can be demonstrated that such support is no longer needed, and that this funding follow the student wherever that students enrolls.
- (b) parents have the right to enrol their children at their local school with the aim of placing them in the least restrictive and most advantageous environment. This choice must be based on having been given full information about available options.
- (c) parents have the right to be equal partners in decisions about additional educational requirements to support the integration process, and to be involved at all stages on an equal basis in decisions about curriculum planning and evaluation when enrolling students or determining individual education plans.
- (d) before a student is referred for assessment, parents must be notified and their permission sought for an evaluation. A multi-disciplinary assessment team, including the parents and/or their advocate, should make the evaluation.

- (e) integration must be planned in the host school environment – including physical and other resources, teachers, parents and students (both those with disabilities to be integrated and their non-disabled peers) – should be prepared before integration takes place.
 - (f) parents and students must be fully informed of their child's progress regularly and must be given the choice to withdraw their child from any integration program if the parents are concerned about the wellbeing and educational outcomes of their child.
 - (g) support services must be provided for students, parents and teachers, and all students and classes with special needs in a regular school must be an integral part of that school.
- E.4.3 Early education programs must begin as soon as a disability is identified and these should be a continuum of suitable programs throughout the school life of that child. Funding must be provided to develop and implement programs which facilitate the early recognition of all disabilities and the development of appropriate learning programs.
- E.4.4 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 student teachers with:
- (a) basic knowledge of learning difficulties/disabilities which may be encountered by teachers in regular classrooms;
 - (b) assessment and teaching strategies related to learning difficulties/disabilities and the knowledge to access and use support services;
 - (c) the knowledge to observe and implement programs for children with learning difficulties/disabilities and/or behavioural problems;
 - (d) mainstream teachers already in the system must be regularly in-serviced in special education teaching strategies.
- E.4.5 Teacher aide allocation should be provided to allow assistance in the classroom where students with disabilities are being taught.