

Submission to Senate “Inquiry into the education of students with disabilities”

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I am the father of an 11 year old boy, who has fairly severe disabilities, his condition does not have a name but in simple terms, his brain did not develop properly. As a result he is non-verbal, has uncontrolled seizures, is incontinent, he can only walk short distances on flat surfaces, he is fed through a tube in his stomach, he requires constant assistance.

I believe what is provided by the Queensland State Government and the Commonwealth is hopelessly inadequate for the education of students with disabilities.

My son attends, Southport Special School, a school run by Education Queensland, for ages from 3 to 20 . I have been concerned for many years about the standard of education he receives at this school, I have had the opportunity to compare his special school to a Child Care Centre and to a facility run by Autism Queensland at Sunnybank (Qld). Our son attends a Child Care Centre during School Holidays and attended the Autism Queensland facility for two semesters several years ago. I can say as a parent observing what happened at each place that **he does not receive any more educational instruction at Southport Special School than he does at the Child Care Centre.** He made the biggest advances in his physical and intellectual development while attending the Autism Queensland facility. I believe this was because of the intensive program in place at Autism Queensland, there seemed to a better staff/student ratio, they had more aids and access to PE professionals etc for “hands on” programs. Unfortunately students can only have a “short term” placement at this facility.

At Southport Special School, in our son’s class there is one teacher and a teachers aide to 5 children. The school hours are 8.45am to 2.30pm, this is 15 minutes less than the school hours for students attending a “regular” state school, this is as a result of the loading time onto transport being taken out of the instruction time. **This practice seems to be a clear case of discrimination because the children attending Southport Special School are receiving less “instruction time” as a result of their disability compared to the same age children at a “regular” state school.**

When you consider the students are at school for a maximum of 5 hours 45 minutes, you take out the amount of time required for feeding, toileting, giving medication, breaks for lunch etc then there is very little time for anything else. In regards to access to Physiotherapists, Speech Therapists, Occupational Therapists etc, the politicians in Queensland and Education Queensland will tell you that Southport Special School has a number of these professionals on staff. What they don’t tell you is that they are only based at Southport Special School but have to service every state school, not only Special Schools, in the region from Beenleigh to Coolangatta. In reality these therapists only assess the children and then advise the teachers on programs/exercises etc that teachers have to complete, as a result these programs are rarely fully implemented as the teachers do not have the time or extra help to complete them.

In Queensland there is an Ascertainment procedure which has been in existence for about 8 years, this is a process where students are categorized on levels according to their needs, which I was advised would determine the amount of resources required by each student. In our son's case he is Ascertained as Level 6 Physical, Level 6 Intellectual and Level 4 Visual impairment, level 6 being the level requiring the greatest amount of assistance. In practice the levels only have significance in terms of overall funding for the school, so the more level 6 students at a school the higher the funding. However, the school then tries to spread the allocated money as far as it can regardless of the ascertainment level of individual students, because the funding is really hopelessly inadequate, so level 6 students don't receive extra resources to help them compared to a lower level.

I believe that the resources provided by the Queensland Government for educating children with disabilities is a disgrace, I believe the Queensland Government provides the absolute minimum they think they can get away with and have no real concern for the welfare or education of these children. Unfortunately, parents of disabled children are usually not very outspoken because they are so tied up in just caring for their children.

Unless someone has a child with a disability they cannot understand the effect these children have on every aspect of your life including the effect on your other children. Most people would think that the Government would give these children a high priority and provide the best they could, but they don't, they simply do not see many votes so provide only the absolute minimum. The whole system seems to be paralysed by indecision as a result of endless enquiries, task forces, focus groups etc. there seems to be continual indecision due to the argument for and against total inclusion of children with disabilities. As parents we seem to hear rumours that the latest thinking is total inclusion and Special Schools are going to close and then we hear the trend has changed back to favour Special Schools.

It seems to me that if there is adequate funding then separate special schools are more efficient because then all the specialist equipment and staffing can be located at one place. However, because of the lack of commitment by the Queensland Government to Special Schools, my son would probably receive "better" education at a "regular" State School, because Education Queensland would then have no option but to provide him with "one to one" staffing and the necessary resources and facilities for his needs as he would almost certainly be the only "high support" needs child at that school.

Being able to judge the effectiveness or otherwise of the education system in regard to severely disabled children is extremely difficult because you can't compare results as you can with children attending "regular" schools that do not have disabilities. The potential or capabilities of a child with intellectual disabilities in particular can only be judged on an individual basis, you can't for example judge the results of an individual school or one State against another State in regard to these children because there is no basis for comparison. **As a result the children with disabilities suffer because the "system" cannot be measured so no one becomes accountable.**

Obviously the educating of children with disabilities is a very difficult and costly task but surely a country like Australia should give the highest priority to assisting children with disabilities. These children should be given every opportunity to achieve their full potential regardless of the incredible obstacles that are in front of them. It is certainly a measure of the compassion or otherwise of our society if we cannot provide the very best in assisting these children.

I have become very despondent about the quality of education my son is receiving, I feel that I am not providing the best chance for him, but what alternatives do I have. The private school system apparently does not want severely disabled children and the State system is clearly failing. Perhaps there should be an independent assessment of each child to determine the amount of funding required for the education of that child. It could be quantified in terms of the cost of educating a child who has no disabilities with a multiplier for example our son who is Level 6/6/4 may cost four times as much to educate than a "regular" student. These funds would then have to be provided by the State and the Commonwealth to the school he is attending whether it is a State school or an independent school. **This method would then ensure that appropriate funds, at least, are being provided, because it can be measured.**

Dennis Watt