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

I am the parent of a 13-year-old girl with cerebral palsy and attention-deficit disorder who is currently in year 8, at Brigidine College, St.Ives, NSW.

I write as one who has spent much of those 13 years seeking out and implementing the multi-disciplinary care, advice, therapy and education required to address her multitude of physical and intellectual disabilities that range from mild to moderate in degree.

I therefore hope that my experiences and observations will serve, through this Inquiry, to benefit those parents and children who come after me, by bringing about real changes that will support those who have the courage to provide effective and dignified education for the less-than-powerful in our community.

Firstly may I say that raising and educating a child with a significant disability can be a great, on-going and often life-changing challenge. Parents often make enormous efforts and sacrifices to rectify problems, alleviate conditions and enhance the quality of the child's life. This journey can take a great toll on family comfort levels but is travelled with the knowledge that each child's life is unique and valuable and that that child is entitled to have his/her needs acknowledged and met in a respectful and fulsome way. Those entitlements include the opportunities to develop as fully as possible as a human being, and to function safely in society, with all due respect as an Australian citizen, in a dignified way.

The critical issue here is creating a society whose level of decency and civilisation *naturally* includes those structures and institutions that offer the very opportunities required for children with special needs to develop.

This is where careful, appropriate, intelligent and quality education is vital. Such education, I am sure, makes the amazing difference between, on the one hand, the child ending up in bleak 'institutionalisation', or inferior circumstances and on the other, being able to enjoy the freedoms and fulfilments of life lived at their optimum level of independence.

Unfortunately, education for children with disabilities or 'special needs', is in many cases, less than ideal, to say the least.

After my daughter spent two years at a Uniting Church kindergarten in Forestville, (Sydney), that had the benefits of a qualified 'Special Needs' teacher for some days of the week, it was a shock to enter the Catholic primary school system.

In terms of educating such children, it is miserably deficient. Ignorance is rife. Principals without a 'special needs' background or experience do not have a real understanding of those children's requirements. Appropriately qualified staffing at the classroom level is grossly inadequate or non-existent. Generally speaking, they lack the professional training to address the special educational needs posed by these children, and in any case are swamped by large classes and time demands. Where teachers aides were available, the time allowed was usually about an hour or two a week which wasn't anywhere near enough. Often, these Catholic primary schools would have a 'Special Resource'-type teacher available for a limited time, who would meet with parents (rarely), to try and see the way ahead, but in the end, never change the inherent structure of the school's program to cater for the disabled child.

Realising the hopelessness of trying to continue with adapted mainstream education, we were referred to St. Lucy's School in Wahroonga, (Sydney). Although originally for the blind and vision-impaired, this school broadened its brief to include children with 'special needs' of varying nature, no doubt in response to enormous demand. In fact, their Outreach program has expanded greatly in recent years for similar reasons. This school we found to be nothing short of outstanding in its whole approach. Its dedication to warm, respectful yet rigorous education, excellent staff, intelligent programming, quality solutions, and general standards were an inspiration. One student in my daughter's class travelled all the way from Liverpool to Wahroonga each day, such was the level of education and care. This speaks also of the desperate need for such education and the lack of it in their own locality.

As St. Lucy's School is primary only, a great problem exists in the question of where to educate such students for the secondary years. To the horror of the Principal at St. Lucy's, our local private Catholic secondary school, Loreto Normanhurst, would not consider an enrolment application for my daughter, as, they stated that they cater for the 'more able end of the spectrum' !! (The spirit of Mary Mackillop, let alone Jesus Christ, doesn't exist there, I thought to myself). No physical changes to school buildings whatsoever would have been required as my daughter can walk, manage stairs, etc. The obstacle to acceptance seemed to lie in the prevailing paradigm of unwillingness as much as lack of expertise. They were ideologically opposed to the idea, education for such students is not a priority, and I suspect it is because disabled students typically do not possess 'kudos capital', to coin a term. To market themselves competitively, such a school wants to boast students with outstanding sporting or academic prowess. Furthermore, and as part of those aims, they are much more inclined to spend funds on aquatic centres, for instance, instead of staff with Special Education qualifications and any other resources required to educate special needs students.

Another special education school in our locality, St. Edmunds, Wahroonga, (as I understand), caters for the more moderately affected students, so was not indicated for my daughter, who falls into a 'grey area'. That is, her disability was not severe enough for such a place but she could not cope in a mainstream school without considerable academic support and modification. Such a unit that was made up of severely-affected students would be quite inappropriate and limiting to her progress and yet there were very

few alternatives. Her measurable skills in objective testing are 'scattered', from borderline through to low average, making appropriate placement difficult. So where do you go if your child is 'high-functioning', (in relative terms of disability), yet unable to manage in a mainstream school? Students who are in this 'grey area', which would include plenty of Downs Syndrome children and children with learning difficulties, would fall into this group. I think that this group are most 'at risk' and yet, ironically, they are the most 'rewarding' in terms of their social potential! With appropriate education they are the most likely of all disabled students to benefit from supportive services and function most independently as a result. There are places such as the Allambee School at the Spastic Centre for the profoundly affected with cerebral palsy but nowhere for the mild-moderate child.

Fortunately, we learned that Brigidine College, at St.Ives, an independent, Catholic secondary school for girls, had recently established what is called The Chisolm Centre. This Special Education unit is an extraordinary initiative of the Principal himself and came into existence with the support of members of the community. It operates within the school campus and provides all the benefits of integration with mainstream students where appropriate, combined with the support and specialised educators/programs that students require. After a year of providing various assessment reports, testing, meetings, writing letters, etc. my daughter was accepted into this unit, but many missed out. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that there is considerable pressure on enrolments and very little alternatives are available. Without the Chisolm Centre we would be lost. Clearly, it is essential that this unit not only continues into the future, but expands, and, as a noble enterprise of very high order and invaluable service to the community, is deserving of very real, effective financial support from government.

My ideas for the Inquiry would include:

- Making information on what special education options are available in the community freely accessible to parents of disabled students and the general public. That this information be thorough and specific, comprehensive and practical;
- Making this information include the preschool, primary, secondary and vocational/tertiary phases;
- Making this information include both government and non-government options;
- Make this information available/contextualised within other community services/therapy organisations for children with disabilities;
- Provide substantial and ongoing government funding for those in the community who are endeavouring to provide quality education for students with disabilities;
- Campaign to 'normalise' the idea of students with disabilities being educated *at a quality level* within mainstream schools in supportive units; work to minimise hostility to these students
- Educate school teachers, both primary and secondary, about students with disabilities, their value, needs, rights, learning requirements, and so on.