

Listening to the kids with special needs

OPINION & ANALYSIS *From the Newcastle Herald on 4 August 2010*

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WE cannot begin to understand the daily challenges of parenting a child with disabilities or special needs, particularly as these parents expend so much time, energy and money advocating for their children to receive the same education opportunities as their fellow students.

From day one, parents and teachers struggle to have their voices heard, and this is the reason the inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability and special needs was established.

This is a human rights issue and governments must start listening.

I have chaired a number of inquiries since entering the NSW Parliament, but never has an inquiry received as many submissions as this one, which is a terrible reflection of the NSW Keneally Labor government's record.

The committee received more than 700 submissions from a cross-section of parents, teachers, schools and education bodies, who provided example after example of how our education system is letting these children and their families down.

There are more than 32,550 students in NSW government schools with a confirmed disability and in excess of 50,000 students who have special learning needs.

In NSW, there are more than 13,000 students with disabilities in Catholic and independent schools.

There has been a shift in educational policy over the past two decades internationally and across Australia, away from segregating all students with disabilities and special needs, to a more integrated model of education where many of these students attend regular classes and schools.

However, the overwhelming view heard during the inquiry was that there are significant inadequacies in the NSW education system for these students.

Many students have to reconfirm their disability year after year, an onerous and time-consuming task for teachers and parents, particularly if their disability and level of need is unlikely to change dramatically in the space of a year.

Scores of teachers from the Department of Education and Training schools told us they do not receive adequate support to cater for the learning needs of the 15,000 students with disabilities and the 50,000 students with special needs enrolled in mainstream classes and it does not allow them to fulfil their responsibility to meet the learning needs of all students.

One of the barriers to the effective inclusion of students with disabilities and special needs in the education system is the lack of appropriate funding in both the government and non-government sector.

Another issue is whether a diagnosis of a disability based on the Department of Education disability criteria should be a prerequisite for receiving disability funding (currently the case) or whether a functional assessment of a student's learning needs should be considered.

Most inquiry participants held the view that an assessment of functional skills as well as confirmation of a diagnosis should be used to determine whether a student should access disability funding, because on its own, a diagnosis does not give an accurate picture of a student's learning needs or capabilities.

Claims by the department that there is no waiting list for special education places are contrary to evidence from schools and parents.

While special education places for students with higher support needs are driven by demand, places for students with lower support needs, such as mild intellectual disability, language, reading, behaviour and in some cases autism, are fixed.

The inquiry heard time and again that teachers are doing the best they can with their limited resources and many do not feel equipped to cater for the learning needs of students with disabilities and special needs.

Professional support services, such as speech therapy, physiotherapy and counselling are provided to students with disabilities and special needs in NSW government and non-government schools, but evidence to the inquiry shows that these are inefficient and inequitable.

The existing system for delivering professional support services, such as speech therapy, physiotherapy and counselling, to students are inefficient and inequitable and are characterised by long waiting lists in the public system, limited access for students and their families in remote areas and low socio-economic communities, expensive private services and inadequate support for students with disabilities in schools for specific purposes.

The impact of delays in delivering these services can be life-long.

Also of concern is the ongoing problem of limited access to school counsellors in NSW Government schools. This issue has been identified in many previous inquiries. Clearly, the Keneally government is not listening.

Recommendations from the inquiry can be found at <http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/gpsc2>

Robyn Parker is a Hunter-based MLC and chairs the inquiry into the provision of education to children with disabilities and special needs.