

Subject: Senate Inquiry into experiences of students with a disability

Date: 20th July 2015

Thank you for conducting this much needed inquiry. It is long since overdue, given the current educational climate of funding, performance testing, policy formulation and accountability frameworks.

I am the parent of a 20 year old intelligent, amusing and fun loving young man doing his final year at the local State school (Year 12). My son has been through inclusive schooling from kindergarten to his current year 12. He is completing a School Based Assessment (unscored VCE - no ATAR score). He has autism, chronic epilepsy (Dravet's Syndrome), severe expressive communication and a physical disability. He is funded on the Victorian Program for Students with a Disability at Level 5. I thank the Department of Education and Training (DET – Victoria) for the funding he has received throughout his school years, without which we would have found it difficult to support him on the path of an inclusive schooling. This submission is our journey as a family, on the road to inclusion for our son. A journey fraught with trials and tribulations but successes, that I believe every child has a right to experience.

Inclusion is about creating opportunities for our children within the regular school environment and our son has a right to an inclusive education. The right to learn in his neighbourhood school, to have **accommodations, adjustments, adaptations and modifications** made in order to enable him to realize his full potential. To be a meaningful contributor to society and to set precedence to change for all students like himself pursuing an inclusive schooling. This calls for a system that ensures that his right is upheld as a **fundamental constitutional right**, and that it has a responsibility to set up systems and mechanisms to ensure the creation of equal opportunity irrespective of his disability.

Unfortunately the education system for students with a disability in Victoria is far from meeting the imperative ambition of an “Inclusive concept” to teaching and learning. Most importantly, **attitudinal barriers** continue to exist in every shape and form. Even with the best intentions of some school administrators, our son has experienced **social exclusion, poor accountability measures, a lack of educational opportunities that do not guarantee the possibility to continue studies and differentiation leading to forms of discrimination**.

Fortunately for him, he has parents who have a fairly strong knowledge and awareness of the system, come from a social model perspective to disability and pursue a Rights-based approach to advocating for him at all levels. We have learnt to be strong, resilient, and knowledgeable having worked our way through the many challenges, dilemmas, hurdles and “hidden agendas” that we faced along the way. Despite there being laudable policies in place that are well defined for every stakeholder to work with, there continues to exist **clear tensions between policy and practice**. The experiences we have gone through in all these years of schooling would enable me to write a thesis on the subject of “how exclusion is seen as inclusion in our schools today”.

As a teacher in the field of disability studies and education, as well as, a Parent Support Advocate, I continue to support parents who face difficulties at school and a majority of these problems are a result of the following:

- DET officials particularly Disability Liaison Leaders, are overloaded with complaints from parents. Many of them do not have the skills, tenacity and experience in their roles as leaders to address parent complaints effectively and efficiently. On many an occasion, I was advised to pursue enrolment in a special school for my son rather than a mainstream school. I was also coerced into re-thinking my decision to pursue an inclusive education only because my son's disability was considered too hard to work with in the mainstream setting.
- Many Department representatives lack awareness and competence, and are demoralized by the process. Their advice and solutions to schools are contrary to the Department's policies on inclusion. For example: A Department representative recommended that a suspension be instituted against a student with a disability without putting a Positive Behaviour Support Plan or Behaviour Monitoring Plan in place. Such a recommendation is contrary to the DET policy titled "Effective Schools are Engaging schools".
- There is a major problem of how to redesign a system of education that still bears many of the features of the purpose for which it was originally formulated - that of educating those who are "so called normal" in mainstream schools and those who have a "disability" in special schools. All provisions for such a purpose are then orchestrated and distributed within this framework.
- Schools do not have teachers who are qualified to deliver a curriculum for all – **a curriculum characterized by unrestricted access, non-discrimination, flexibility, participation, responsiveness and sensitivity to meet my son's diverse needs as a learner.** To this day I continue to modify my son's work, report to teachers on how the modification achieves the aim and objectives of the lesson at hand and I can see the total disempowerment and lack of responsibility teachers have shown to making reasonable adjustments. This is because of ignorance, lack of awareness of creatively applying teaching strategies such as differentiated learning, mediated learning or scaffolded learning and opting for the easier route of putting our children in the too-hard-basket rather than being creative and flexible in their thinking or seeking specialist help.
- It is foolish to think that an inclusive policy can be implemented within the existing current educational system with minor changes. As inclusion is not simply an add-on to the current operations of a school or an educational system, significant restructuring and re-culturing processes are needed in the area of how teachers do their work, how the Department meets policy objectives and what would it take to be truly inclusive.

Our son is at the end of his schooling years, but to this date the challenges he faces are:

1. Education Support Staff not being able to communicate with him using his Voiced Output Device (communication tool) despite training and support given over the years.

2. Solutions that are always “Special school” oriented rather than looking at flexible and creative ways to working through issues.
3. Poor peer support and mentoring facilities to create and mediate friendships or social circles of support for our children.
4. Pushing for VCAL or TAFE options rather than giving our children the opportunity to choose VCE options and pursue a University education.
5. Failure to recognise the need for specialist intervention outside the Department given that the Department itself lacks this kind of advice or support.

Suggestions and recommendations for the way of ahead:

1. The issues of funding and support must be examined closely. The more funding that is poured into schools, the more the exclusion and less the accountability particularly in relation to what occurs in the classroom.
2. A transparent approach to how levels of funding are allocated based on the Educational Needs Questionnaire. The current understanding being “the more severe the disability the greater the funding”. This adds to the labels, compartmentalisations and annual global budgets of special schools.
3. Please remove all such labels from all regular schools for rooms allocated to students with disabilities such as the “PSD room”, “Disability and Impairments room”, “Additional Needs room”, “Exceptional students room” etc. All they become are “microcosms of a special school environment” and our children then congregate only with children with a disability.
4. Every Education Support Staff must **compulsory** complete a minimum 1 year program (Diploma of Education Support) with Literacy, Numeracy and Additional Needs units, with a **Satisfactory Credit** rating on all these units to be considered for employment within the Department.
5. Every Education Support Staff must **compulsory** complete a minimum 1 year program (Diploma of Education Support) with 150 hours of Work Integrated Learning in mainstream schools, in order to support students with disabilities in mainstream schools.
6. The salaries of Education Support Staff must be appropriately leveraged in accordance with their designation, role expectations and position description.
7. Teachers must have a Post Graduate qualification with compulsory training in units that address the theory and practice of inclusive schooling. Work Integrated Learning for teachers must have compulsory work experience supporting and teaching students with a disability. Such experience must include reporting at Student Support Group Meetings, skills in writing Individual Education Plans, skills in report writing and addressing queries and contentious issues that arise when the school is called to question by the Conduct and Ethics Committee in the region.
8. An **Inclusive Education Team** that comprises of trained teachers, therapists, specialist services staff, parent support advocates, allied health staff and inclusive education consultants be available in each region to assist schools and parents when contentious issues arise. This team must be independent of the Department. They must have members who have a firm and staunch knowledge of what an inclusive education means, have a strong credibility for enforcing inclusive schooling policies in schools and be stalwarts in the field of

education. They must report directly to the Minister of the many challenges arising for all stakeholders. The lack of accountability on a systemic (school) as well as individual (practices in the classroom) front has been consistently reported through the Held Back Report, the Victorian Attorney General's Report and the Shut Out Report.

9. Parents need to be entrepreneurs of change for their children and in turn need to understand the issues of equity, justice and equal opportunity in the present educational environment. From assisting them to come forward in addressing issues through the complaints process to understanding the concepts of curriculum differentiation and providing support through workshops, training courses and inclusive schooling support programs, learning can be reinforced at home and collaboration and partnership at schools must be encouraged.

Our son completes a School Based Assessment for VCE in November 2015 and is currently exploring an Individual Support Plan to take his learning forward, hoping to begin a Certificate IV in Liberal Arts at University. He is one of the few students who with such complex needs, has proven that resilience, tenacity and perseverance in an inclusive school environment has mentally, physically and developmentally far more beneficial outcomes. We continue to support his learning by pursuing mainstream learning programs because he **belongs** to a society, community and family and must be a contributing member by setting precedents to practice and change for better. I continue to support parents of children with a disability to pursue an Inclusive schooling by sharing my experiences as a parent at conferences, workshops and parent support forums. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to contribute to this inquiry.