

Good afternoon everyone.

I'd like to share with you my experiences and concerns regarding my son Finn while he was enrolled in a state primary school in Northern Tasmania.

My husband and I have 2 children, our daughter Niamh is 13 and our son Finn is 11 and he has Down syndrome.

Our main concerns for Finn were:

- limited teacher assistant contact hours.**
- lack of professional development opportunities for teachers and aides.**
- safety on the school property.**
- Finn's happiness.**

Finn's first 5 years attending a state mainstream primary school was a happy time.

Finn worked closely with the same teacher aide, steadily developing academic and life skills, independence and resilience.

All Finn's teachers had a wonderful rapport with him and he learned so much but for the greater part of this time, Finn's teachers and teacher aid were not provided with opportunities to attend Professional Development in the area of Down syndrome.

FINALLY, after 5 years working with Finn, his teacher aide and myself attended a professional development seminar on Down syndrome!

I have attended 3 of these seminars presented by DSSA and found the information to be incredibly helpful as did Finn's aide.

As each notification of the seminars arrived, I contacted the school requesting that Finn's teachers and T/A attend.

Every time except one, I was told that the school did not have the funds.

I felt so disappointed hearing this.

These seminars have reminded me of ways my family and I can teach and assist Finn in the many aspects of his life.

Ideally, this opportunity should have been offered to ALL the teaching staff during Finn's time at the school, because throughout the day many of the staff would come across Finn, be it on duty at recess & lunch times, as his PE teacher, music teacher, or personal care for Finn if he'd had a fall or felt unwell.

If all the teaching staff attended such a seminar, they would then have the opportunity to discuss the information as well as support each other.

I quote Dr. Round from Monash University, in an article from The Age earlier this week "The first crucial point is that teachers need to know their student's well, know their strengths and teach to them. ALL students can learn and be taught, and if students know their teachers have this belief in them, they often step up to the demands."

Dr. Round also said "It is a legal requirement stipulated in the Disability Act and Education Standards, that teachers adequately attend to the needs of ALL students under their care. To ensure that these requirements are met, special needs teachers attend

professional development courses to maintain their skills.”

I think the lack of professional development offered to Finn’s teachers deprived him the opportunity to learn from a fully informed professional, better able to understand Finn’s specialized learning needs. Looking back, I wish I had fought harder for Finn’s rights.

The Inclusion Policy as a model is a good idea ... Finn has benefited from his years at Primary school, but we will never know how much more he could have achieved if the school had more resources.

In pushing for the best outcomes for Finn, I have felt that I’ve been a bother and nuisance to senior staff when sharing my concerns, requests or making suggestions.

So in 2012 I contacted the Tasmanian Disability Education Reform Lobby for further advice.

‘Reasonable adjustment’ within The Education Standards means to supply learning tools and equipment, employing additional staff, or altering a building’s structure to accommodate the student’s abilities.

These adjustments ensure students are receiving quality learning and feel at ease in their surroundings. So, following the student’s enrollment, planning for the child’s educational and personal requirements needs to be THOROUGHLY reviewed, WITH the parents involvement, and then implemented.

This procedure should be mandatory and parents to NOT be the instigators of such a procedure.

Finn requires speech therapy on a regular basis. From the age of 0-4.1/2, specialized speech services were readily available to Finn at St. Giles Therapy Centre but once he commenced Kindergarten this service ceased which is where the school seemed to fall down in taking over the role.

Finn can speak well but sometimes his pronunciation of words can sound a bit blurred. As a family we are aware of this and we have and will continue to support this need.

Schools need to ensure that this service is provided regularly, employing enough therapists to offer one on one therapy. WE take communicating easily for granted, so for an individual who struggles to communicate, extra assistance is crucial.

Last year, I offered to speak to Finn's class mates to provide them with strategies when communicating with Finn, but again my simple request was not followed through.

The ramifications of funding cuts in schools are frightening and discriminative. Not only is the child with the additional needs affected by reduced general & special aide time, so are their class mates and teaching staff.

The lack of funding for schools also extends outside the classroom walls and into the school grounds. In my opinion ALL schools require fencing whether a child

with a disability is enrolled or not. Fences should be an extension of the building.

My son wandered off the school grounds only a handful of times within 5 years but that's a handful too many.

Thankfully in early 2013 the school perimeter was finally fenced, 4 years after I first asked for fencing when Finn was in Prep.

In my opinion I shouldn't have had to ask.

ALL children need to be kept safe.

Why wait for a catastrophe to occur to THEN make changes.

I am speaking generally here when I say that children with additional needs tend to think differently on some levels to their peers. I think they operate on a more innocent and literal level. Therefore, their surroundings need to be reviewed very carefully, thus protecting them from risks and danger.

Throughout Finn's time at primary school, the staff and the students treated Finn so kindly.

As he progressed through the grades though, the social gap became wider.

In grade 4, at age 11, Finn was functioning at approximately the level of a five to eight year old.

We noticed that he wasn't as keen to go to school as he used to be, and we wondered what might be causing the change in attitude.

We've always been worried about what happens to Finn at recess and lunch time when he's outside with the other children, above all else we want him to be happy.

Friendships cannot be forced, it's a natural occurrence when people are drawn together who are of a similar mind set.

Finn did his very best to meet his peers socially and academically and to learn how to behave in certain situations. I simply wanted Finn's teachers and peers to understand what it is like for Finn to learn all these skills.

One day after school I asked Finn, "Who did you play with today?"

He answered, "My shadow."

Hearing this broke my heart.

Finn is now a student at Northern Support School, St. Georges Campus in Launceston and he is in his element! He now looks forward to going to school again and he talks about his friends each day.

In conclusion, I believe how we learn and cope with situations as children, moulds how we handle events in our adulthood. So therefore, my hope is, that our government and education department can work closer with schools. By providing realistic funding to schools, learning environments will be enhanced, therefore the students with additional needs will have a greater chance of contributing to our community in their adulthood.

Thank you.