

For the Education and Employment References Committee inquiry

Submissions due 21 August 2015

Committee Secretary

Senate Education and Employment Committees

Greetings Gentlefolk.

I wish to submit this document for your inquiry into current levels of access and attainment for students with disability in the school system, and the impact on students and families associated with inadequate levels of support to the Education and Employment. Feel free to contact me if you require further information.

Trying to identify the various issues that have contributed to a 14 year nightmare with Queensland Public Schools would be a Herculean task. Abbreviating them for a report of few pages would run the risk of trivialising complex events which had long term side effects. So the aim here is to identify common issues and give a few examples.

My 18 year old Daughter has Aspergers. She is a brilliant young lady who, with a little support is capable of doing many things. Ranging from volunteering at the gates during the local 2011 Flood Benefit Concert, to performing on stage several times a year. Yes she has sensory disabilities and has difficulties dealing with loud classes, people moving behind her, sudden noises or unplanned changes, but many of her problems are manageable with a little planning and patience. She was diagnosed through the efforts of a Queensland Education Department employee over a decade ago. Once we got the diagnosis and the box was ticked so the School got its extra funding, that was it. Beyond the regular teaching plans and a little support in the class room, we were left to our own devices.

There were no referrals to local services, no support groups within the school. Every bit of help my daughter has received over the past decade has been the result of my research and my constant hunts for something that would help her. I did not even know about Disability Services (DS) until 2 years ago. I found about DS after the High School tried to pressure Parents to buy iPads. Despite the pressure, the School was not prepared to offer any suggestions how Parents and Students could protect expensive personal property from bullies. By the time I was told about DS, the Service had stopped funding iPads. There was no way I can afford to buy an expensive piece of (basically disposable) technology when the school was not able to protect my daughter from bullies, much less protect her property. So my daughter missed out on any opportunities gained from the technology.

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We are currently in a situation where my Daughter is on a managed time table to finish the final two subjects needed to complete her Senior Certificate. This is the result of a needless complex series of School Administration failings covering a 5 year period: although I suspect any of the School's documentation would suggest otherwise. I was repeatedly (verbally) told arrangements had been approved when they had not been. These failings mean she will not achieve her aim to be OP eligible at the end of Term 4. Which is why she is also doing Tertiary Prep subjects at the local University, authorised after another needlessly complex chain of events. I'm currently under a Principal imposed 1 email per a week restriction with her case manager because I've been labelled "unreasonable" and falsely accused of being "abusive", which makes being a responsible Parent more difficult.

This year alone, one School Staff documented one of my daughter's more serious sensory meltdowns as a "temper tantrum". This was documented where my daughter could see it (and was destroyed when I asked about it in my 1 email a week). This same week we found my daughter had gotten 90% for a Uni Maths assignment. She got an A for that subject, a mark achieved because the University Teacher understood what Aspergers is, permitted my daughter to sit with her back against a wall (to prevent people moving behind her) and had a quiet class. Meanwhile at school my daughter is being repeatedly sent home several times a week because the School's new buzzer system leaves her feeling chronically sick. (Other students with special needs have had similar problems). So far during the 2015 school academic year I doubt my daughter would have had 10 weeks where she had not been sent home. Now she's 18, the only communication I receive is a "courtesy phone call" informing me she's walking home.

Our personal experiences can be divided into two main sections. Administrative / Environmental problems & Personality issues.

On several levels, the School environment has been disruptive & the support for students with special needs has been inconsistent. These inconsistencies ranged from what information we were being given, the support, even basic procedures. Any documentation of meetings was not made available for everyone attending the meeting. No minutes were taken & Parents could not obtain copies of any reports or summaries of meetings. With no paperwork, there is no way a Parent could challenge how a meeting was reported or ask for feedback or follow ups. The school has programs that my daughter was denied, basic things like working on resumes, applying for a tax file numbers or even obtaining work experience.

Any complaints to the local Department of Education Office or to the Minister were referred back to the school. It seems to be the default position. There is no functional hierarchy and no working appeals process. I have a letter from my daughter's Principal where the Principal refuses to discuss a problem with me. My complaint to the Department was referred back to the Principal. There was no further feedback.

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For all the time wasted creating Care Plans, many Teachers did not have the time, or the inclination, to refer to them. I have problems signing documents, when I was told these details could be changed when needed & did not need me to sign any amendments. I was mortified to find my daughter got detention because I had failed to sign something I was not able to, because I had been in hospital and having told the SEU this, fully expected this was in an amendment to the Care Plan so the Teaching Staff knew.

There's been numerous situations when different "trained" Staff seemed unable, or unwilling, to understand how individuals with Autism struggle even with understanding directions. How seemingly innocent remarks can have serious, even long term, consequences. I recently found why my daughter was terrified to fill forms – a critical basic life skill. Over six years ago an unidentified Teacher Aid erroneously accused her of spelling her name wrong. She is terrified of making mistakes since. Currently staff will tell students that important tasks or information were "not important", most likely as an attempt to defuse a situation with the aim to continue at a later date. However to one with Autism if something was "unimportant" mean it was not important and did not have to be done: resulting in problems when assessable tasks were incomplete as the Student believed it when been told it was not important.

The school buzzers have been a recent development. The issues with bullying have been chronic. During sensory overloads my daughter cannot recall people's names/faces, a fact that both bullying students and some staff seem to exploit. If she cannot identify the person who bullied her, then nothing was done, even if she could identify the class where the bullying took place. In Grade 8 by the time I found that several Students had been trapping her behind a security fence claiming to the whole grade how they'd "caged the beast", it had happened five times with absolutely no intervention by staff or any documentation of the bullying. In Grade 9 she was forced to sit between two known bullies. Apparently the teacher preferred students to sit in alphabetical because it makes it easier for her to call the roll. On occasions the teacher had marked her absent, when the bullies sat together & would not permit her to be where she was supposed to sit.

The School environment also creates many inconsistencies. Permitted options that help one student with special needs was denied for other students with similar needs. There seemed to be a set allocated number of attempts to resolve problems before staff gave up, many issues ended up being ignored as if they would go away. My Daughter was discouraged from taking certain subjects because there would be no SEU support. However we were not given the same information about support for other subjects. My daughter was threatened with expulsion after getting her first "D", for a subject where we were never told she would not get support. Part of the fall out of that development was a letter from the Principal, where she claimed the school did not have the required documentation for her diagnosis, despite the fact she'd been supported by the SEU for over three years at the time the letter was written.

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At times, the definition of "school support" was open to interpretation. My daughter's Grade 8 Case Manager told me I had "too high expectations" that my daughter would get into University. In 2013 another Case Manager called me claiming my daughter "was being naughty" during a major sensory meltdown. When I arrived at the school, I had to physically lift someone in sensory overload, out of a chair in a noisy SEU foyer. Later she told me how she had repeatedly tried to explain what was overloading her but the Staff kept trivialising her concerns and offering unsuitable advice. This was not the first or last time this had happened. My daughter has been subjected to a wide range of cruel, judgemental, ignorant even verbally abusive experiences from supposedly professionally trained staff who seem unable or unwilling to read Students' care plans or ask them about issues. I know many parents fearful to voice concerns in case their child would be punished, I know other students who had been.

My daughter's report cards has many references to "unexplained absences" when she had reported in and/or presented the appropriate staff with the relevant Doctors Certificate that seem to have been misplaced afterwards. When I've queried this, some "absences" were recognised as being in error. I was informed the report cards had been corrected. However as I was not issued with any amended documents, I cannot confirm if this had happened. I've lost count of how many times I was (verbally) assured of actions, that later turned out not to be the case. To suggest the school has a chronic communication problem is an understatement.

When referring to personality issues, I'd like to recognise there are many honourable, dedicated – even functional and adequate – teaching staff working in Queensland. However I am referring to several kinds of individuals those who either believe they know better than Diagnosing Specialists, refuse to see there is any harm in their actions or (unfortunately) should not be permitted near any child, much less Students with Special Needs.

It seems some Staff frankly were more interested in protecting their jobs than recognising the needs of students with mild disabilities. I have seen a wide variety of unsavoury and inappropriate behaviour by "trained professionals" that outside the school environment would be considered unacceptable. Exchanges where reasonable people would expect an apology, but any attempts to obtain an apology within the school had Advocates labelled troublemakers or banned from speaking to staff. I have witnessed acts committed by those in a position of *loco parentis* that would have involved the Social Workers or the Courts had they been committed by a Parent, a Guardian or even by a person on the street.

Both in Primary and High School, my child has repeatedly been punished for symptoms associated with her condition. She's been accused of being "rude" (etc) by staff who will not listen to her, appear not to have read her care plans and refused to understand how their personal actions had contributed to make a meltdown even worse. Often this lead to further punishment or denial of support.

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Her Grade 6 Teacher refused to accept the diagnosis. She refused to take part in any teacher/parent meetings and refused to let my daughter use any of the behaviour suggestions outlined in those plans. One incident I witnessed caused a serious sensory overload where my daughter was displaying symptoms that resembled shock; pale skin, not responding to verbal stimulus, shallow pulse and shallow breathing. In a several month period the school was calling me about 10am each Wednesday, to collect my daughter “for nits”. The care plan documented how scratching her head was a early sign of a sensory overload. However her Grade 6 Teacher insisted she saw nits. It appears she found it easier to send my daughter home than to understand what were her triggers or teach her. This event stopped the day it happened on a Thursday and I was in tuck-shop. The Primary School Principal agreed I could treat her using my electric nit comb (in the tuck-shop) then send her back to class after morning tea.

Unfortunately this has not been unique. This teacher has not been the only person who has taken this option. It seems there's a preference to remove distressed students from the class room (or school) rather than understand what caused the distress, manage/prevent symptoms or provide a safe teaching environment. Students with special needs are being denied the chance of a meaningful, or functional, education by the Institutions who benefit financially from their enrolment. Even before the buzzer problems, at High School my Daughter was been sent home so many times it's been now referred to as “institutionalised truancy” in this household.

At her High School, I personally witnessed a Senior staff member (who knew my daughter & knew she was on a managed timetable) assume she did not have a valid reason for being out of class and was screaming aggressively at her in front of the tuck shop. By the time I intervened, my daughter was in the early stages of a meltdown repeating she “didn't know what [she had done that] was wrong”: something the teacher was obviously not listening to. During the resulting months of meetings to address this, I heard a variety of justifications for the teacher's actions. One of the solutions offered was expecting my daughter to wear something akin to a Jewish "Star of David", so all staff (and bullies) knew she had special needs. The school admitted she had done nothing to justify the abuse I witnessed, BUT also stated the teacher had also not done anything wrong when he verbally abused her in front of me.

These meetings failed to recognise problems when teachers scream at those with sensory disorders, similarly it failed to recognise the long term effect it has with those with special needs. Instead the result of these meetings was to introduce a complex procedure where my daughter (amongst other things) had to have an account at the tuck shop (until then was only permitted for Staff) and had to get SEU staff to phone in her pre-orders on the days she had a late start. An option that created extra duties for non-teaching staff and no recognition that other students experiencing a similar situation will have a similar problem and be subjected to similar procedure – probably with different outcomes.

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There are many Students and Parents in situations fairly similar to ours. Teachers shouting at those with sensory disabilities, chronic bullying, class rooms changing at short notice, the new buzzer systems, issues trivialised and more. If "trained" Staff believe screaming at Students with special needs is part of their training, then their training has failed. The school seems to consider each individual problem to be unique. Students are left feeling they are stupid or alone, believing they were the only one with an issue. A reasonable person would expect that an Institution supposedly dedicated to help those with special needs, may be able to refer to a growing collection of various helpful techniques & suggestions build on past experiences.

My daughter's High School is supposed to have a good reputation for supporting students with special needs. I am still shocked when a lovely bright student with special needs told me "the best [she] could expect" would be to work in Endeavour. One other former student was hailed as being a success because she had a one shift a week washing dishes in a restaurant, until being let off when she turned 21 & remains unemployed. A Mother tried to report how her son had bullies telling him "to kill" himself. The School's response was to tell her "If he did [kill himself], it'd be his choice". The Son now has chronic mental health issues because of the bullying, and she is accused of being "aggressive". Absolutely no recognition of the sequence of events which would cause distress. It seems fairly common to accuse Parents of being angry even abusive, with no natural justice and any opportunity to appeal. Seems there's a lot of advantages to deny or restrict Parents' access to those who have access to their children.

Many Students with minor disabilities are falling through the gaps. During the school years, members of their Support group remain stressed and unemployable as they are constantly called when schools fail. While the students themselves, many who would have been able to hold meaningful jobs, are leaving school traumatised, untrained & so are unemployable. Many leave with a token education and feeling they are worthless, stupid, a drain on resources or a burden to be managed. In this current climate of political insecurity, there's not even a guarantee that these people will spend the rest of their life on a Disability Pension, raising concerns about their future.

Thank you for your time

Rachel (Rai) Akers