

APPA Senate Inquiry Submission: 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

This submission sets out the response of the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) to the Senate 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. APPA represents 7,200 Government, Catholic and Independent primary school principals in all states and territories.

The submission begins with some general comments before addressing a number of the Inquiry's terms of reference.

Background and general responses

The Inquiry is taking place in the context of a significant increase in the numbers of children with disabilities in Australian primary school classrooms. APPA research, conducted jointly with the then Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), stated the following:

Teachers are now more likely to have more children with serious medical conditions in their classrooms than twenty years ago as a result of government policies of inclusion and also because there appears to be a higher incidence of such children in the population at large.... DEST data show that the percentage of students with disabilities in the primary level of education has increased steadily, doubling between 1995 and 2006. (Angus et al, 2007: 37-8, 39)

APPA is also aware that the current data collection process on children with disabilities will indicate this growth has continued.

The Australian Primary Principals Association remains fully committed to meeting the needs of this expanding population of students with disabilities and for their inclusion in our primary schools. It is in schools that children learn to participate in Australian society not only through skills and knowledge but also through the values, behaviours and beliefs practised every day in primary classrooms.

The funding available to schools to provide a high quality education to students with disabilities in a mainstream classroom setting is, in broad and, more often than not, specific terms, insufficient.

Professor Michael Sawyer in his report to Australian Department of Health and Ageing (DOHA) in 2008 calculated the cost of ideal educational service pathways for a number of specific, diagnosed

mental conditions. His calculations for the educational pathway recommended for a child with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) for example would require a provision of \$32K over a two-year period. The differential between that calculation and current funding realities makes clear that funding models do not recognise the real costs of a specific need. Instead, they determine priority of access to a fixed resource.

The reality is that there are not enough resources to provide adequate levels of assistance to teachers who have children with disabilities in their classroom. As a consequence, schools have to find the extra support from their regular funding in order to supplement any provided allocation for the child with a disability.

If the resources known to be required are not available and provided, it is an unrealistic community expectation that primary teachers and schools can adequately meet the full needs of children with disabilities. APPA has been clear about this issue for some years.

Difficulties are exacerbated when combined with the expanding population of children with serious but non-medically diagnosed conditions. The APPA research report cited above highlighted that the incidence of students with disabilities and teacher-identified special learning needs is approximately one fifth of all children in primary schools and that there would be considerable variation across classes.

It is important to understand the challenge a primary teacher has with a class comprising of one or more students with disabilities and other students with additional needs, but for whom no extra resources are available. In this situation, despite the best efforts of committed teachers, the likelihood is that the needs of some children (or, in reality, most or all children in the class) cannot be met. In the case of children with emotional and / or behavioural problems, the interventions required should begin early in a child's school life, be sustained and be adequately funded.

Separately, funding arrangements for the support of children with disabilities should recognise the effect of comorbidity, or the presence of multiple instances of disability affecting a child. It can be the case that none of the instances in isolation is sufficient to trigger access to resources while together they represent a major impediment to the delivery of a good education. Some primary teachers now face unsustainable pressures. Unless funding and support levels match the expectations, those expectations are impossible to meet.

Joint government commitment to developing a nationally consistent, coherent and equitable funding model targeting students with disability is required. Such a commitment should aim to ensuring that children with disabilities and children who require modifications to learning program due to special needs or highly disruptive behaviours receive the support they require regardless of sector, school or socio-economic background.

While there is a growing number of students with special learning needs there is also an increasing

expectation that their education will be delivered in an inclusive mainstream setting. Primary schools have long been enrolling children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms and managing their active participation. Wherever possible, schools establish the highly individualised and specialised learning programs so necessary for successful inclusion. The current success of these students is more often than not the product of teacher and principal goodwill and commitment, a resource that is being stretched under the tension of limited resourcing and growing demand.

Primary schools are also requiring access to allied health services to support the enrolment of students with disabilities with, for example, individual therapy programs. The inconsistent, and sometimes non-existent, therapy support challenges the most committed teachers and teacher assistants. The school and teacher are required to develop an individual learning plan that outlines the educational and therapy needs of the child. Parents, too, are placed in an at times competing position of having to advocate on behalf of their child for specific agency service intervention. In some cases, the parent provides the only information about a student's learning needs.

The full implementation of the National Disability Insurance Scheme has considerable potential to impact both positively and negatively upon schools. The funding for services, accessing therapy specialists, transitioning to school or next setting, or coordinating agencies that may be working with the family and child all present challenges on a number of levels. Another key aspect is the collaboration between schools and external service providers e.g. special education staff and psychologists, speech pathologists, etc. The resourcing required falls beyond the classroom because of the additional administrative and management demands.

APPA fully supports the inclusion of students with disability in schools. It is in schools that children learn to participate in Australian society by gaining the skills and knowledge, and the values and beliefs lived every day in their classrooms. However, unsustainable pressures threaten the continuing capacity of schools to deliver on this aspiration.

In stating APPA's clear support for students with disabilities in mainstream schools the following points are made:

1. The current needs based funding models do not guarantee the capacity for schools to educate students with high level needs. Some schools, usually within areas of high SES, have both lower levels of incidence within their communities and a greater capacity to supplement core and needs-based government resourcing. In fact, Angus et al observe that despite needs-based funding it is often the most needy schools that end up with very few, if any, extra resources to meet their higher level of need.
2. APPA believes that current disability funding models generate inequities between states / territories and sectors.
3. There also exists an expanding group of students with serious non-medically diagnosed conditions. The needs of one child can stretch limited school / class resources in a way that leads to the loss of learning engagement across the whole class. While recognising the role of the teacher in responding to specific learning difficulties and managing classroom behaviour, the

growing incidence of extreme and disruptive behaviour or mental health needs requires specialist resourcing.

4. Access to therapy services and advice is vital if schools are to deliver a quality education and learning program for students with disabilities.
5. Primary school principals need to be informed of the impact and changes the NDIS will have on current arrangements. Schools need forward planning time to adjust to the new arrangements and ensure the provision of services and learning is maintained. The involvement of principals in developing implementation arrangements is required so teachers, teacher assistants and parents feel there is coordination and management of the support required for students with disabilities.

Government at all levels have committed to inclusion policies and practices. At one level this is to be applauded; at another it has significant and practical resourcing implications for primary schools. Primary principals and teachers have a proud tradition of, and ethical commitment to, welcoming all students into their schools and classrooms wherever possible. What is now required is a consistent and fair national policy framework that foresees a new investment in the full range of children who require support in primary classrooms.

Questions for comment from the Inquiry

Comment upon: 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.

APPA identifies four key aspects:

- Principals see the need for additional funding support to be needs-based, sector-blind funding.
- The general response from principals is that there are inadequate levels of funding to support the resources required to meet the needs of students with disabilities. The general outcome will be reduced support and fewer modifications to program. In some cases this may lead to students not achieving their full potential. Additionally, increased stress and workload may impact negatively upon a teacher's capacity to work with students with disabilities.
- Students with additional/other needs (e.g. mental health) often present the most difficult teaching challenges and have a high cost-resourcing component. This can impact on access and level of support to access the curriculum. Additionally, implementing effective management practices is hampered due to inconsistent or limited access to specialist professionals, e.g. psychologists. The outcome is a compounding of behaviours and incidents that lead to more severe consequences including suspension from school.
- Principals indicate the process for accessing resources can be 'over bureaucratic'. This can be related to expectations and interpretations of the National Disability Standards and/or Education Acts in each state and territory. So that completing documentation does not distract schools, teachers and parents from the real work of educating children with disabilities, jurisdictions need to review policies and practices to ensure what paperwork and documentation is absolutely necessary.

Comment upon: What should be done to better support students with disability in our schools?

Supporting students with disability requires the following:

- Professional learning for beginning teachers, principals and other school leaders. Targeted training and professional learning for teachers, support staff and all school staff.
- A structured planning process.
- Plain English materials available for families to help them understand the process and expectations of enrolling into a primary school. Families also need information about how the disability standards are defined and applied in the school environment. The information needs to allow for schools to add contextual information with an emphasis on the ideas of dignity and respect.
- Access to appropriate levels of professional support and assistance with assessment, planning and therapeutic interventions.
- Access for classroom teachers to curriculum documents, resources and possible assistive technology devices or options.
- Training and online materials for teachers/aides/parents. Shared across Government, Catholic and Independent sectors.

Comment upon: The early education of children with disability

APPA believes the essential components for an effective early education for children with a disability include:

- Programmes need to be in place at 0 – 5 years of age.
- Screening needs to be universal.
- Students and families need to be supported in preparation and transition into regular schooling. Receiving schools need resources to support transition programs.
- Ongoing support and counselling to address the challenge of diagnosis and acceptance of need by families.
- Collaboration and coordination of services.
- Access for teachers to appropriate assessment tools or information that allow for better developed learning goals and identifying achievement.
- Consistency in identification and diagnosis across states and territories.

References

In The Balance - The future of Australia's primary schools, Angus, Olney, Ainley et al For the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), 2007

Report for the Australian Department of Health and Ageing, (Sawyer, Professor Michael) 2008