



Council of Catholic School Parents NSW

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Submission:

Inquiry into the Provision of Education to Students with a Disability or Special Needs

Preliminary Statement

The Council of Catholic School Parents [CCSP] is the official body recognised represent the parents and carers* of students in Catholic schools in the dioceses of NSW and the ACT. Members of the Council are the Diocesan Parent Organisations, each of which represent the parents of students within the respective dioceses in Catholic Systemic schools, and the Catholic Independent Schools.

The CCSP responds to the Legislative Council's Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs in NSW on behalf of parents and carers* who have their children in the 585 NSW Catholic schools which enroll 239,224 students.

The CCSP has raised the issues surrounding children with special needs with successive Ministers and Shadow Ministers of Education over the last 15 years. These representations have yielded little advancement in the area of special needs education.

The CCSP has in the past called for a comprehensive and integrated whole-of system (and cross-sectoral) reform effort in the area of special education and support involving an examination of the factors which serve as facilitators for or barriers to equity and inclusion including the legal and policy framework, funding models, assessment arrangements, school structure, the use of individual teaching programmes, the involvement of additional teachers and aides, teacher training, parental involvement and partnerships with other services, and a state/national agreement over definitions of disability. Taken together, these issues present a considerable reform agenda.

The CCSP thanks the Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee No.2, through its Chair, Robyn Parker MLC, for initiating this important Inquiry.

As partners in school education, parents in Catholic schools are pleased at the opportunity to make a contribution to this important area of Government decision making.

Submission:

1. Introduction:

1.1 The CCSP firmly believes that the quality of a society must be measured by the respect shown to the most vulnerable of its members. Children with special needs are some of our most vulnerable.

1.2 The mission of Catholic education is to welcome and show special care for those with the most need in our community (National Catholic Education: 2010). It is also the mission of Catholic schools to uphold the wellbeing and dignity of each and every child and their families.

* The term 'parents' will be used throughout the remainder of this submission to refer to parents *and/or* carers

1.3 Catholic schools in NSW enrol in excess of 10,000 students with a recognised, and therefore funded, disability. This figure has grown steadily over time.

1.4 The growth in enrolments is often in spite of the comparative resource limitations faced by Catholic schools and is a testament to:

- a) the high value that these parents place on a faith based education for their children over resource considerations, and
- b) the quality of care and provision provided by Catholic schools with limited financial resources.

1.5 Catholic education, however, is constrained in its ability to provide the same degree of equity of access and provision of services available in the state system due to the limitations of funding provided by the state and federal governments. For some parents this becomes the opportunity cost of not choosing a state school. Of course, some parents will argue that some of this 'cost' is partly ameliorated by other factors such as the sense of community and/or belonging, faith considerations etc that the school may offer their family.

1.6 Parents with children in Catholic schools are also assisting in the supporting the education of their children through school-based fees and levies.

1.7 While the level of funding available to children with disabilities in Catholic schools is concerning so too is the level of funding available to support children in the state system.

1.8 Australia recognises the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which holds that parents "*have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children*". Parents with children with disabilities and special needs do not often enjoy this Universal right to the same extent as parents without children with special needs. Many parents who would otherwise choose a Catholic school (or other non-government school) for their child can feel constrained in their choice of school by the difficult funding situation.

1.9 All parents want the best for their children - whether they have a disability not - and wish to give their children who may have a disability the same quality educational opportunities as their non-disabled children.

1.10 There have been numerous inquiries and reports into the state of special education funding and support. Almost universally they have found that the critical issue to be addressed above all else is the total quantum of funds available.

2. Response to Terms of Reference

2.1 The nature, level and adequacy of funding

2.1.1 The overall level of funding needs to be increased for all children with disabilities and special needs and there needs to be parity of funding across all school sectors reflecting the needs of the children.

2.2 Best practice approaches in determining the allocation of funding

2.2.1 The CCSP believes that any funding mechanism must satisfy the following principles. It must:

- genuinely give life to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in relation to **parental choice**
- ensure the **dignity** of each and every child is upheld
- ensure equitable funding is provided to **all students** who meet agreed disability/ special needs criteria
- provide **parity** across all school sectors and settings in order to support equitable access and learning opportunities
- be **flexible** so that schools and school systems can continue to offer important levels of support in the form of on-going professional development for staff and support to parents
- be **evidence-based**
- recognise and ensure that parents are engaged as **integral partners** in the education of their children
- ensure diversity of provision (types of schools and settings / mainstream and specialist schools)

2.2.2 The Catholic Education Commission NSW has implemented an evidence-based approach to the identification and appropriate targeting of support for children with special needs in Catholic schools that could be usefully applied more broadly. The CCSP recommends that the CEC model be investigated further for its applicability as a possible instrument for funding purposes. The CCSP is aware the profiling instrument

has a strong parental involvement component which has generally been very well received by the parents involved.

2.3 Level and adequacy of special education places

2.3.1 Over 10,000 families currently choose a Catholic school for their disabled or special needs child. These enrolments continue to grow at a steady rate and cover the full range of disabilities and needs. If a more equitable funding mechanism was in place, there is little doubt that many more families would feel they could choose a Catholic school for their children.

2.3.2 Parents consider many things before choosing a school for their child (this may include the child's level of need, where siblings attend school, level of support being offered, location, the impact on other children in the class, philosophy or ethos of the school, their own educational philosophy, recommendations from peers or professionals and so on). Many parents seek an inclusive and integrated placement for their children in mainstream school settings but others continue to seek specialist settings. There are seven 'special schools' in the Catholic sector that provide specialist support and services to parents and their children. **This right to choose the most appropriate setting for their child must be upheld - that is, diversity of places must continue to exist.**

2.3.3 Some parents, particularly those of severely disabled children who cannot care for them full-time at home, find the lack of appropriate places a devastating reality. The closing of Kingsdene is an example of contracting placements for severely disabled students. These parents are often left with no reasonable choice about where and how to school their children.

2.3.4 Families in rural and/or isolated areas face often very limited choices in the support of their disabled or special needs children and access to specialist schools and other specialist services is very difficult. The Catholic Education Commission NSW has supported the specialist residential services at Palm Avenue and Dalwood Assessment Centre for over twenty years with an annual grant. Recently the services offered by Dalwood and Palm Avenue have been relocated. The lack of community consultation around the decisions affecting these services has been breathtaking. This has left rural parents with a lot of uncertainty about the future. The availability of these sorts of essential services for rural families needs to be looked at in the context of this inquiry as well.

2.3.5 In addition to the many children with identified special needs there are a growing number of children presenting with other (non-funded) learning and behavioural needs. The needs of these children must also be considered and in particular how the supports they need can be resourced.

2.3.6 The Catholic sector supports children with behavioural support issues, especially those who have been or are at risk of being excluded from school through two specialist schools, Boys Town and the John Berne School and a number of annexes attached to mainstream schools (mostly Christian Brothers' schools). These schools enrol young people from a variety of backgrounds and often they come from the government school sector. These children too need to be funded at the same rate as if they were still in a government school. As with children with disabilities their needs are the same irrespective of the school they attend.

2.4 Adequacy of integrated support services for children with a disability in mainstream settings

2.4.1 In the Catholic sector diocesan Catholic Education Offices and some schools (independent Catholic schools particularly) have local responsibility for special education support and services. The types of support services being offered then can vary between regions and schools and even within schools.

2.4.2 The different levels and types of support offered across schools can be a source of confusion and angst for parents who are already overwhelmed by the school system and their child's particular needs. A clearer articulation of what services exist and are available, what rights parents and students have, how to access the various programs and sources of funds, what other support is available to support families would be of support to many parents. A more transparent, simplified and equitable funding mechanism would also ease the concern and confusion of many parents.

2.5 Provision of a suitable curriculum

2.5.1 The CCSP believes the NSW Board of Studies and ACARA at the national level have a responsibility to provide a flexible curriculum base that caters for the full range of students' abilities and interests and that allows students to access it in different ways.

2.5.2 There is a relatively high degree of confidence in the NSW curriculum being able to offer this sort of flexibility. The new Australian Curriculum must also be able to meet the needs of all students.

2.5.3 The provision of relevant and engaging curricula is not sufficient on its own however. The capacity of teachers to flexibly and creatively use the curriculum to cater to the needs of all students is also important. This is an area where on-going professional development for teachers is needed.

2.5.4 More can be done to meaningfully and practically engage parents and carers in the formal education of their children. Parents are often very isolated from the formal curriculum (its development and implementation). The curriculum (along with other things such as pedagogy and learning styles) can be made more accessible so that parents can meaningfully take their place alongside teachers in supporting the learning needs of their children.

2.5.5 There is a breadth of research that consistently shows that when parents are positively and meaningfully engaged in the work of schools, children's outcomes are enhanced. That is, when the goals, strategies and aspirations of the school match and are mutually supported by the goals, strategies and aspirations of the family - good things happen for children. This is particularly relevant for children from more disadvantaged backgrounds and children with special needs.

2.6 Student and family access to professional support and services

2.6.1 Families in rural areas often tell us about the lack of availability of services such as speech pathology, OT and other allied health services. Families either face long waiting lists (these are also common in cities) or face having to travel long distances at significant cost to access services. There are serious equity, health and educational issues to be addressed here.

2.6.2 There is a clear need to better resource and expand local health and professional services in certain geographical areas. The waiting lists in some areas can be 18 months to 2 years (common in urban as well as regional areas) to access some allied health services - this is totally unacceptable. In some areas, critical services such as adolescent psychiatry/psychology, are simply not available.

2.6.3 The Executive Director of the CCSP, Danielle Cronin, undertook a Churchill Fellowship in 2009 looking at public policies to support parental engagement in the United States and United Kingdom. Part of this fellowship looked at the notion of 'full-service' schools or 'extended schools'. These are schools that are linked up with or connected to a range of support services and/or agencies such as early childhood centres, early intervention, health, community services, adult education and parenting support. This model of schooling provides a wrap-around support for families and children. Several jurisdictions in Australia are adopting full-service school models in some of their most vulnerable communities. The new National Partnerships for Low SES communities are helping to drive this.

2.6.4 The full-service school model provides a good basis for a fuller examination of the delivery more streamlined and easier to access services to support families. Such a model to support families with children with special needs would need to be multi-agency and cross-sectoral. Services may be located on a state school site for example, but would be universally available to families from neighbouring schools.

2.7 Provision of adequate teacher training (pre-service and on-going)

2.7.1 There is a perception that pre-service teacher training has been inadequate in preparing teachers to meet the diverse needs of all students, particularly those students with special needs. While there have been some changes to pre-service training courses to take account of this concern (the introduction of a mandatory 2 unit course in the Bachelors degree) there is a need to build and improve upon these initiatives.

2.7.2 On-going professional support and learning for teachers is also critical. The introduction of the new national curriculum will provide an important opportunity to consider how professional development can be delivered to support teachers implement it in an inclusive and accessible way.

2.7.3 The NSW Institute of Teachers' Teacher Standards and new National Teacher Standards will hopefully support the provision of relevant and quality pre-service and on-going professional learning for teachers in this area.

2.7.4 Special Education teachers are often highly skilled at working with and for parents of children with disabilities and special needs and value their input and collaboration in planning, developing individual education plans and monitoring progress. These are skills that could often be further developed and supported by teachers in regular/mainstream classrooms.

3. Conclusion and Recommendations

3.1 The data shows that the numbers of children with disabilities and special needs is increasing in all sectors and the diversity of needs is also widening.

3.2 The demands on teachers are also increasing, with new curricula to implement, new accountability requirements and parents (and governments) expecting more and more from schools.

3.3 Quite simply the situation around support for children with disabilities and special needs is likely to stagnate or even deteriorate if nothing is done as a result of this Inquiry.

3.4 There is a clear moral imperative for all of us to act now and resolve the issues around the provision of education to children with disabilities and special needs. The rights of these children and their dignity as individuals and as learners must be upheld and supported above all else (including politics and sectoral differences).

3.5 This is a significant issue for all school sectors (State, Catholic and Independent) and for mainstream and specialist schools/settings. It needs to be addressed in a holistic, cross-sectoral way and politically bi-partisan way.

3.6 An outcome of this Inquiry must be a recommendation for additional resources for all children with disabilities and special needs (a bigger bucket of funds) and that these children are funded on an equitable basis according to their level of need irrespective of the school they attend.

**D Cronin
Executive Director
On behalf of CCSP
February 2010**