

Disability Discrimination in Our Region.

I am a parent of three children living in North East Victoria. My eldest son, Will is now a young man with a physical and intellectual disability who uses a manual and electric wheelchair for the majority of his mobility. He was born with Cerebral Palsy, Spastic Diplegia, an Intellectual Disability and a Vision Impairment some seventeen years ago. I would like to address some discrimination issues that my son and our family have had to face during this time.

School:-

Where do I start!

Choice of School

Both my husband and I are adamant supporters of Integration and inclusion into mainstream school and the community. We also acknowledge families have the RIGHT to choose for their children whether it be mainstream or special school/setting.

As we live on a family farm, I enrolled Will at the local small rural mainstream school that I had attended in my youth. Hume Region DSE and my advocate both advised that to enrol at a larger Benalla School would have better outcomes for Will. Also it seems against the wishes of some of the small school's families, school council and some parents expressed concern regarding how Will's attendance would affect their children in the classroom. We had to met with the school council to try to dispel their misconception that "Will's needs would take up all the time of the only teacher so who would teach their children" and convince them that "Will would have a full-time aide." The then current head teacher made it quite clear that Will would only be enrolled and attend if the school had the proper "resources" in place, which the head teacher had literally quoted from the DSE literature on Integration. Will did successfully enrol and attend that school for 3 years but only after considerable negotiation with DSE staff, the school council, and a new teacher!

Later on at another school, Will was reaching secondary school age, when I was pressured by a speech pathologist to seriously look at the Wangaratta Specialist School as an option for Will. Only after I inquired as to whether she was employed by DSE and had they changed their policy from integration to segregation, did she desist. This pressure was a precursor for the next Program Support Group for Will, where the integration teacher, classroom teacher, aide, and a therapist representative had obviously ganged up together and tried to rail road me into sending Will to the Special School. My advocate sat totally dumbfounded while I restated the many reasons why we had chosen mainstream school. Thankfully the Principal finally came to my rescue backing me up reminding those present that it was ultimately our decision. He later apologized to me over the phone acknowledging the unfairness of four against one on the issue. This experience I had as a minority voice, under pressure is a common experience for parents of a child with a disability.

When we did finally move Will into a larger Benalla School it was fairly clear which school / kindergarten is pro-integration and those that are not. That means that only some schools / kindergartens become quite expert at inclusion and others miss out on becoming more tolerant. Still further on down the road at Secondary School, we were faced with more pressure to look again at Special School especially when any problems arose. "Some parents do chose to send their child to Special School"; "We find that children with disabilities tend to mix with their own kind"; "We are losing the top students to a nearby private school, and the school doesn't want to be seen to attract THESE kind of kids" indicating Will, are the more memorable discriminating quotes we have been subjected to, from three different teachers. Thankfully there is no pressure currently as the attitude of the current staff is refreshing and positive.

Unfortunately, some teachers continue to use the perception that the lack of funding will limit any PSG goals that parents wish to propose. It often just needs some lateral thinking and research into a certain issue to solve the problem. On one occasion during a PSG when funding was needed for a particular item a visiting teacher suggested that the child disability allowance should be the source! This is a very delicate area and is quite confronting for most parents. It sometimes

feels like others in powerful positions are constantly patronizing and judging you as useless parents, and unable to provide for our own.

It is common for parents of children with disabilities to be asked or expected to aide their child at either kindergarten/school when the aide is not present or to keep them at home. This does not happen to parents of children without disabilities.

Curriculum

Discrimination does occur in the area of curriculum and the lack of modification for inclusion of children with disabilities. It is often left up an unqualified integration aide to deliver and teach subjects to students. At secondary school, an Integration Teacher told me that it is the classroom teacher's job to modify the curriculum after I asked if she assisted with curriculum modification. At primary school, another classroom teacher defended the lack of modification with his attitude that Will was just one of twenty students in his class, as Will had his own aide so the other students deserved his full attention. It was unfair to them if he spent so much time on one student's curriculum. As children move into secondary school and the learning gap widens between peers segregation is the easy option, especially in English and Maths. This practice is in direct contradiction to government policy on inclusion, and is clearly discriminatory.

Camps / Excursions

School camps are often a problem if integration aide duty statement has not included their attendance on excursion and camps as part of their job. This is a staff issue and really should be resolved at interview time not in the PSG where parents are made to feel quite guilty about even requesting their child attend an overnight peer camp. Parents are often asked to accompany their child overnight instead of the aide. This defeats the whole purpose of camps, that is for children to experience activities at another setting away from Mum and Dad.

Year 7 Ski Camp to Mt Hotham I was told it was "inappropriate" and "unsafe" for my son, Will to attend. Also that other teachers had said "Will would take up a seat on the bus that would be better used by another student." And "That the integration aide would also take up a seat better used by another student or teacher." The Integration Teacher proceeded to organize a segregated day tobogganing at the snow with other integration students "tailor made for Will". After much persistence and negotiation with the District Liaison Principle and finally our local Member taking up this discrimination issue with the school agreed to take Will to the snow a year later. He went on the bus with his peers, staying in the same lodge (yes, the steps were a problem but it was planned to only negotiate them once a day) and having a fantastic time being ferried around the slopes on a skiddo and taking sit-ski lessons from the local paralympian trainer, and living it up at the disco on the last night. It was a huge success but Will and our family should not have had to go through so much stress for so long.

Sometimes families are not even made aware that a camp or an excursion is on because it has already been deemed/judged by school staff that it would be too difficult to include your son/daughter in specific activities.

Sports / Recreation

Children with physical and intellectual disabilities often miss out on sport activities as it deemed "too hard" to integrate them with the needs of the other students especially in the traditional sports areas. It often only takes some lateral thinking and planning to include our children but there needs to be an incentive and motivation from the teachers to take up this challenge. There are plenty of programs and in-services (i.e. Aussie sports, PMP etc.) which should render this as a NON issue in schools, but it continues to be a stumbling block.

TAFE

One local young person has been unable to attend a desired course as they have Diabetes as well as Down Syndrome and the parents were told there would be no nurse available to supervise and administer the insulin needles. Another deaf student was denied a TAFE interpreter for a work experience course running during the holidays as there was no funding!

Clubs and Community Recreation:-

Will was excluded from our local hydro therapy pool on a number of occasions as the YMCA management had fully booked out the hydro pool for lessons to able bodied children. Will is unable to use the other pools as the temperature is too cold for his disability. We understand that it is good business have the pool pre-booked but after trying to deal with this discrimination issue at a management level, we had to go the Shire (owner's of the facility) to complain about the discrimination. After some consultation and a new policy drawn up, we again faced un-necessary conflict at the entry desk as staff had not been properly informed about the new policy. I find it hard to believe that the YMCA would not already have an anti discrimination policy that is part of their ethos.

Our local Bowling Club presents as very accommodating on initial inquires regarding inclusion of our children in their bowling days. Unfortunately, when it comes to the crunch the excuses for non inclusion trotted out are that it is either too wet and cold, or too hot. Or they do not ring back later or book a group activity in one of their already pre arranged tournament days. This is pure discrimination.

Work :-

Businesses today have to be cut throat to remain viable and for owners / managers to take on a person with a disability is still a 'big ask'. Even with all the incentives from gov't departments employing a person with a disability is still viewed as doing that person a BIG favour. Even amongst staff at the, dare I say it "sheltered workshops" that employ both people with and without disabilities there are discrimination issues.

These issues severely limit any choice/options of a career or suitable work for people with Intellectual Disabilities and Physical Disabilities.

Using Public Transport and Access to Buildings:-

There is limited public transport in the country especially if you live outside of the city.

Currently, Will uses a school bus which is eight kms from our farm. When he moves onto his Futures program he may need to access the Wangaratta bus (36 kms return) or Benalla/ Vicrail (20kms return trip) depending on his activities. Trains are relatively user friendly but they will need address a couple of issues in the future i.e. more allocated spaces for people in wheelchairs and their doors and passageways need to be widened. I have heard of some people in wheelchairs being put in the cargo carriage! This is degrading and unacceptable.

Bus and city tram travel for people in wheelchairs is prohibitive unless there are willing drivers/conductors/aides to physically assist the transfer on/off buses/trams at destinations.

Although, there are some accessible trams in the city, more wheelchairs accessible buses/trains and trams are the answer.

There is an anomaly in the Futures for Young Adults program that does not take into account the great cost difference of transport for people living in rural areas compared to their city cousins. Transport can be included in that person's Futures package but it will not be acknowledged as an added extra. This DHS discrimination issue needs to be addressed immediately.

Access to most building is getting better but the age old "heritage listing", hardship case on the business is often thrown up as excuses, or " the ramp would end up out on the road."

Social Exclusions:-

Commonly children with disabilities are NOT invited to peer birthday parties, nor stay-overs, nor just to hang out with their mates. The common reason is other parents have a fear of the unknown i.e. toilet issues and dealing with behavioural problems are too confronting for most parents.

