



25<sup>th</sup> June 2010

## **Response from the Learning Support Team, at Armidale High School, NSW, to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into a National Disability Care and Support Scheme.**

The Learning Support Team, at Armidale High School, NSW, strongly supports calls for a National Disability Care and Support Scheme, which would fund the life-time medical care and support services, needed by people with disabilities, no matter the cause of their disability.

Our response will address issues that affect students with disabilities and schools, with a particular focus on the high school years.

We believe that the productivity of a society is enhanced when every aspect of the care of the disabled is taken into account, funded and managed effectively.

The critical role of education, as part of the support services accessed by an individual with disabilities, is acknowledged as our contribution to the productivity of the whole society. It is a critical period for the laying of strong foundations for the future.

For the family of a disabled student, there is a secondary benefit, in that the hours spent by their children in the care of an educational system, provide much needed respite and the chance to engage more productively, as individuals, in pursuing their own careers.

For the school community, the presence of students with the full range of abilities helps to build foundations for a more compassionate society, and we accept the challenges and responsibilities of the education and support for students with disabilities.

What needs to be addressed, from a productivity point of view, is that all the stakeholders have the funding required to ensure a positive outcome.

For a school, productivity is impacted, if, in addressing the additional needs of students with disabilities, it adds to a work- load that would not exist without that student.

For the personnel in a school, it is essential that the added responsibilities and time necessary to coordinate a program for a student is given the necessary funding. The responsibility for the education of students with additional needs should not be seen as an 'extra' to be carried out voluntarily on a 'good will' basis. Inadequate appreciation of the additional tasks (and the time it takes to perform them) which accompany students with additional needs, leads to resentment, fatigue and becomes detrimental to the successful carrying out of the role of the teacher.

The productivity of an individual staff member affects the productivity of the school.

Essentially, what needs to be acknowledged and planned for, is that for a school to contribute successfully to the full development of the child, the additional tasks that impact on the school's productivity need to be addressed.

1. **For productivity to be enhanced, we believe that a team approach** would ensure that the needs of the child are considered by a range of professionals, working with the client and their family, to produce the most positive outcomes.

We strongly recommend that the students have a school- based coordinator, to liaise with therapists and teachers and plan the student's individual support program.

The present system of support provided to each disabled student does not adequately cover all of the requirements of the school, in delivering the program for each student with disabilities.

2. **Successful planning and coordination would facilitate the most productive utilization of the skills of teaching staff, year advisors and community mentors.** The work that goes into the successful planning for a student with disabilities, involves a considerable amount of time. We believe that the multiple tasks associated with coordination of a school program, require suitable funding. Each student deserves to have a funded coordinator to advocate and negotiate the best possible program on their behalf.

**Typical tasks that a coordinator might do, which require an appropriate level of funding include:**

- Teacher education, support and planning
- Planning an individual learning program
- Supporting teachers with adjusted learning materials and resources
- Liaison with health therapists
- Co-ordination of work experiences and liaison with employers
- Planning of excursions
- Booking wheelchair accessible taxis
- Training and liaison and support of Teacher's aides
- Liaison with School Counsellor
- Provision of details to Government agencies eg Centrelink, Public Trustees,
- Inspection of sites for safety and disabled access
- Notification of maintenance and OH& S issues
- Toileting and bathroom safety issues
- Provision of reports to external agencies eg Case Manager, Insurance companies
- Communication with Case manager and parent/carers
- Coordination of alternative programs when peer group has timetabled exam weeks and there are no classes to attend.
- Coordination of Teacher's Aides duties, and employment issues
- Documenting official reports for NSW School Certificate and Higher School Certificate

Obviously for such a significant work load, adequate time needs to be provided for a coordinator to be released to carry out the duties, or a paid coordinator needs to be funded.

**3. Productivity of all stakeholders would be improved if they were relieved of the on-going battles involving funding.**

**a) There are inequities that exist between the level of support that individual students receive that needs to be addressed.**

**b) Vast resources in terms of time and expertise are expended in making application for funding,** re-applying in a climate of bureaucratic scepticism, where for example, parents are required to provide on- going certification for life- long disabilities, and in making appeals against inadequate funding.

Very few parents have the resources, time and knowledge of the system to be able to effectively advocate for their children in this area.

**4. Productivity of students would be improved if transition from Primary to Secondary school was effected efficiently.**

The transition from Primary school to High school is a critical period for the student, family and school. We strongly recommend funds be allocated to support the successful Transition from Primary school to High school of students with disabilities for teacher education and sharing of knowledge and understanding between the schools. Familiarization with a new environment is essential.

It is of great concern that funding is often reduced in amount when a child moves from Primary school to High school, and we fail to see how this can be justified. A typical day at high school involves a lot more movement between classes; a greater number of adults and students to interact with and a noisier, more frequently- changing school day.

High school specialist teachers are located in different areas of the school, which means that many more areas of a school have to be negotiated by the student, than happens at Primary school.

The physical geography of the school can make it difficult to cover the distance between classes quickly. The need for the student to move around the school with resources and school bags, increases the challenges of a high school day for a student with disabilities and their Teacher's Aides.

**5. Productivity of Teaching and Teacher's Aide staff would be improved with Education and Professional Support.**

In-service funding is necessary, to provide education into the issues which each student with a disability presents. Some disabilities will have a large impact on how a school manages the student.

The high school years represent a significant period of change in all students and many aspects of puberty need to be addressed. For example, behavioural issues can change over time; maturation issues of students (who get much bigger and physically stronger) and social and emotional issues (especially grief & loss issues and sexuality) faced by students with disabilities.

**6. Productivity of students would be improved if each student were able to access the full curriculum.**

Access to a full education program, which includes all the ‘extras’ offered to all students, is the right of every student with a disability. The high school experience is enriched by specialist teachers and it is not satisfactory that a student with disabilities has a reduced offering because of a shortfall in funding.

For example, the funding of a specialist music teacher to work with students from Support classes may vary from year to year, according to budget.

Additional offerings for students such as Work Experiences, Vocational Education, School Excursions, all involve a lot of negotiation and planning to include a student with disabilities. Students may come from families where the resources are already stretched financially and emotionally, so many of these additional programs may not happen.

It seems that the funding for these programs may be reliant on the largesse of State Treasury and consequently may not be reliable.

In conclusion, it is our hope, that the issues we have raised, particularly with regard to education, highlight the need for a national, properly –funded and coordinated scheme to care for people with disabilities, as they move from one stage of their life to the next. Giving all stakeholders due consideration, will be necessary, to achieve the best possible outcomes and we thank the Productivity Commission for the opportunity to submit our response. Attached is a personal response from Ms P McCue who responded to our invitation for staff to submit individual responses.

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Armidale High School

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

I am writing in regard to students with disabilities enrolled in English and Drama classes completing Life Skills.

Over the years I have noticed that these students' ability to participate or even attend many lessons is severely hampered by their needs not being sufficiently supported.

I wish to register my concern for students with disabilities as I believe this inconsistency of assistance interferes with both their educational and social development.

Students with disabilities require greater support if they are to participate in any meaningful way in English and Drama studies.

Regards,

Penelope McCue

English/Drama Teacher

Armidale High

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