

7th August 2011

Robert Schneider (Volunteer in Disabilities)

Dear Commissioners,

The submission I wish to present to you is for the intellectually disabled children.

The intellectually disabled are the most disadvantaged group within Australia as they are totally dependent throughout their lives for decision making from either family or Government services, except for a minute number of high functioning individuals who are able to eventually live independently.

80% of parents with a disabled child separate, twice the national average, placing the child at a further disadvantage.

Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates 4.1% of children up to 4 years old have a severe or profound disability, and this will grow at a rate of 2.3% each year. The intellectual disability does not stop at 5 years old and continues throughout their lives.

Culturally and Linguistically Disadvantaged Parents (English is a second language), find it almost impossible to navigate through a complex system.

Early childhood intervention is a key to inclusiveness for the intellectually disabled, yet all State and Federal Governments have succeeded in creating a fragmented system to access services. There also seems to be some competition between States on which State can create the most number of forms and wait lists for services.

As stated by the Disability Services Commission of WA, current levels for services vary, but typically only offer 1 to 2 hours a week, prior to school. Disabled children who live in remote areas, outer metropolitan or from families with multiple and complex needs, less than half receive any early intervention services until school.

As for the child and their families, the Governments have also created a system for the Early Childhood Workforce, of over compliance, lowest pay awards in the Education or Health Sectors, no career incentives and more, as stated in almost all of the 100 submissions the commission has received so far. This demotivation by Government towards the workforce has resulted in dedicated individuals, mainly young women filled with ambition to teach or care for preschool children, leave the industry. There is nothing more unproductive and wasteful than an individual not using the skills that they have been educated to do.

Maintaining a fully trained workforce for the intellectually disabled child today is nonexistent today.

In December 2010 the Community and Disability Services Ministers' Conference endorsed that Children with Disabilities have the Best Start in Life. What kind of Best Start or inclusiveness is any of the Government's Ministers talking about?

Recommendations on recruiting and maintaining Workforce.

1. The introduction of the elected subject in year 11 and 12 High School of Early Childhood Education.

The course to be a 2 unit course with the 3 unit option to include Children with Disabilities

The scaling of marks for the Higher School Certificate in this course to be equivalent to Mathematics

This will have an immediate impact on the value the education system places on Early Childhood Education.

The Curriculum can be obtained from the first year of either Certificate /Diploma courses and used over 2 years. An important part of the curriculum should be to have at least 20 hours work experience each year, which would give each student a clearer picture when choosing this career path.

Qualified preschool teachers to have the same award pay rates and benefits as primary school teachers.

The Hecs component to be half that of Primary School Teachers, until such time as the shortage of preschool teachers is equivalent to that of primary school teachers.

Career advancement within the system to be encouraged and training paid in full by both the Federal and State Governments each funding 50% of the costs.

Maternity leave and a return to part time work to be offered in conjunction. (One of the keys to keeping the skills within)

Communication is the essential part of education for the intellectually disabled child, therefore further training in programs such as Hanen (Speech) and Picture Exchange Communication Systems, PECS, to be fully funded, not only for all staff to attend but also for a parent and one other nominated family member of the child to attend as well. This needs to be the start of a lifelong partnership between the families and service providers to give the child the best start in life.

Implementing a system where only attendance and incidents, such as, illness, medicine administered, and accidents are recorded during the day by staff on 1 sheet. This will reduce time spent on paperwork. Teachers do not spend 4 years at Uni or TAFE to be taken away from the classroom to fill out paperwork, let them fulfil their ambition to teach.

Directors to be part of all training, and also to be able to choose 50% of the courses on offer. This will give flexibility and ownership within the various programs.

Bonuses on the retention of staff to be given to the directors. This could only be determined after data is received when a pay and benefit structure the same as primary schools have been implemented.

Preschools for the Intellectually Disabled

The State Governments need to establish Government Preschools for the intellectually disabled, as part of the education system.

Early intervention is absolutely necessary for these children to have any chance of being part of an inclusive system, with equal opportunity.

Attendance to be at least 15 hours per week over a 2 year period, 2 full days each week. The Australian Government's Helping Children with Autism Program notes the recommendation of Prior and Roberts 2006 that 20 hours a week over two years essential to young children gaining skills. Not all children attending will be autistic, but this is just an example of the time of attendance required.

Infrastructure can be easily obtained through the existing schools where there are vacant classrooms and the demographics indicate that they will not be full in a future 4 year period.

Due to need for additional staffing I would recommend a trial of only 10 preschools in each State over a 2 year period with the forward projection of providing every intellectually disabled child with a place in the 3rd year.

Funding to be provided by both State and Federal Governments on a \$1 for \$1 basis.

Experience in Disabilities.

Over the past 20 years I have volunteered in many avenues.

5 years as a companion with Camp Quality (Camps for Children with a life threatening disease)

2 years running a seniors social group, 20 years as a volunteer bereavement counsellor.

6 years ago, while volunteering with Eastern Suburbs Respite; I was shocked to see young teenagers with an intellectual disability being turned away due to lack of funding.

This shock in the lack of services in our community has motivated me to establish a free of charge respite centre in our home, which is now in its 3rd year of operation.

We run the centre every Monday from 9 to 3pm during school terms, and now have 14 adult clients, ages ranging from 19 to 52 years old. The day is fully structured, with the goal of social inclusiveness. All food and equipment is provided and once each month during the term we go on an excursion. The success of the program is a result of an incredibly positive team effort from our 4 other volunteers and Holdsworth Community Centre who provide the bus for our excursions and also refer the clients to our centre. All other costs are met by my wife and me.

We would like to invite the Commissioners to visit our group.

The generation that we provide our respite to did not have the opportunity of the service of early intervention.

We do not seem to realise just how difficult it is for an intellectually disabled child or adult to go through our world. My goal is to strive for equal opportunity and to make their journey less difficult.

Kind Regards

Robert Schneider