

Submission from the Special Education Advocacy Group (SEAG)

ACT Legislative Assembly
Inquiry into the Needs of
Students with Disability
Submitted February 2010

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Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Executive Summary	4
Recommendations	5
United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	7
1 Community and Parental Perceptions, Attitudes and Experiences	8
1.1 Education	8
1.2 Equal Opportunities	9
2 Educational Outcomes	9
2.1 Social and Life Skills as Part of the Curriculum	9
2.2 The Individual Learning Plan (ILP)	10
2.3 Pedagogy	10
2.4 Teacher and LSA Training	11
2.5 Recommendations	12
3 Findings of the Special Education Review for Students with Disabilities	13
3.1 Service Agreements	13
3.2 Learning Support Coordinators (LSC)	13
3.3 Social and Life Skills	14
3.4 Staff Training	14
3.5 Communication	14
3.6 Community Concern	15
3.7 Recommendations	15
4 Provision of Services to Support the Educational Needs of Students with a Disability	15
4.1 In-School Therapy and Support Services	15
4.2 Learning Support Coordinators (LSC)	16
4.3 Non-governmental Evaluation Panel	16
4.4 Assistive Technology Team	17
4.5 Specialised Wheelchair Technicians	17
4.6 External Therapists and Professionals Policy	17
4.7 In-school Para-professionals	17
5 Transport for Students with a Disability	17
5.1 Recommendations	18
6 Post-school Options, Transitions and Later Year Pathways for Students with a Disability	19
6.1 Access to Years 11 and 12 for Students with a Disability	19
6.2 Recommendations	19
7 Resources and Services	20
7.1 Assistive Technology	20
7.2 Centralisation of Disability Services	20
7.3 Future Funding of Disability Services	20
8 SCAN and School-based Management	20

Submission from the Special Education Advocacy Group (SEAG)
ACT Legislative Assembly Inquiry into the Needs of Students with Disability

9 Learning Support Assistants (LSA).....	21
10 Planning for Special Needs Education	21

Introduction

This submission has been prepared by the Special Education Advocacy Group (SEAG). SEAG is a group of parents with children with disabilities who attend various educational settings within the ACT public school system, and community members who wish to advocate the concerns and issues of parents with children with disabilities. Our common goal is to advocate for greater services to ensure our children have the greatest opportunity to be integrated within the mainstream community.

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Executive Summary

This submission has been prepared following extensive consultation with parents and carers of children with disabilities, and other members of the community who are concerned with special needs education within the ACT.

The submission covers the following broad areas:

1. **Community and parental perceptions, attitudes and experiences** – input from parents and carers who have children who attend a special education setting in the ACT;
2. **Educational outcomes** – discussion of desired outcomes SEAG would like to see from special education settings in the ACT ;
3. **Findings of the Special Education Review for students with disabilities** – discussion of the findings from the Special Education Review;
4. **Provision of services to support the educational needs of students with a disability** – discussion of support services required to effectively educate students with a disability;
5. **Transport for students with a disability** – discussion of issues and concerns with the Special Needs Transport Scheme (SNTS);
6. **Post-school options, transitions and later year pathways for students with a disability** – discussion of options facing students upon leaving the education system, and options available in Years 9 -12;
7. **Resources and services** – discussion of assistive technologies, the centralisation of disability services and future funding of resources and services;
8. **Student Centred Appraisal of Need (SCAN) and School-based Management** – discussion of issues and concerns of SCAN and School-based Management within ACT special education settings;
9. **Learning support assistants (LSA)** – discussion of the role of LSAs within ACT special education settings, and
10. **Planning for Special Needs Education** – discussion on the need for suitable planning for special needs education within the ACT.

Recommendations

The recommendations made in this submission are listed below. Discussion on the reasons behind these recommendations is included within the body of this submission.

Educational outcomes

- 2.1. Teachers and LSA's should be paid higher rates and provided with other incentives to encourage staff to consider a career in special education.
- 2.2. Introduction of a core compulsory unit in special education into the ACT Teaching Degree.
- 2.3. Use of existing community resources to provide professional development for existing teachers and LSA's.
- 2.4. The teaching of social and life skills to be incorporated into the everyday curriculum encompassing the unstructured environments as well as the more formal settings.
- 2.5. Implementation of student profiles that would be continuous and regularly updated, and would follow students through their school career.
- 2.6. Promote continuity and accountability in the ILP process and for DET to be able to properly monitor the process.
- 2.7. Development of nationally recognised guidelines and realistic benchmarks for students to be measured against.
- 2.8. Provide a clause in the 'mobility' rotation of teachers to enable skilled teachers to remain in special education settings.
- 2.9. Implement the Quality Teaching Model in special education settings within the ACT.
- 2.10. Provide appropriate performance measures for staff and students, with mechanisms for evaluation of programs and student-related outcomes.
- 2.11. Continuation of the provision of appropriate educational settings for students with a disability which include special needs schools, as well as learning support units within mainstream schools, as options for families within the ACT.

Findings of the Special Education Review for students with disabilities

- 3.1. Implement service agreements with specialist and therapist organisations.
- 3.2. Investigate more effective and efficient ways of allocating resources to support students with a disability.
- 3.3. Review of funding systems that are in place including the SCAN process.
- 3.4. Employ school-based Learning Support Coordinators (LSC).
- 3.5. Teaching of social and life skills to students with a disability.
- 3.6. The introduction of a unit of special education into the teaching degree.

Submission from the Special Education Advocacy Group (SEAG)
ACT Legislative Assembly Inquiry into the Needs of Students with Disability

- 3.7. Specialist short courses be developed for all existing principals, teachers, LSA's, and other staff interacting with students with a disability.
- 3.8. Develop communication strategies to improve communication between teachers and teachers, teachers and parents and carers, principals and teachers, principals and parents and carers, and schools to the wider community.

Provision of services to support the educational needs of students with a disability

- 4.1. Provide in-school therapists and support services within the school environment.
- 4.2. The engagement of panels of professionals, who are independent of government departments and agencies, who would provide an objective assessment of what resources students need to maximise their educational outcomes.
- 4.3. Increasing the resources and the capacity of the Assistive Technology team to allow them to be involved in programme delivery and planning.
- 4.4. The recruitment of specialised wheelchair technicians to carry out adjustments and repairs to equipment.
- 4.5. The development of a policy within DET to allow students' access to external therapists and professionals in all school settings.
- 4.6. Provide funding to recruit in-school para-professionals who have the training and expertise to execute programs as developed by therapists.

Transport for students with a disability

- 5.1. Review the current SNTS, including:
 - a review of the facilities on school buses;
 - the length of time students are on the bus both morning and afternoon, and
 - the timing of pick up/drop off's. Parents often have other school children to consider.
- 5.2. ACTION to provide school bus services that have the option of stopping at all special schools in Canberra.
- 5.3. Arrangement for professional training for drivers and carers including:
 - an understanding of the basic characteristics of students with a disability, and
 - Behavioural triggers and management techniques.
- 5.4. Regular consultation through a survey that would provide an opportunity for DET to ensure the SNTS is meeting the needs of all the stakeholders involved.
- 5.5. Provide a mechanism, on a regular basis, for parents and carers to feedback about their experiences of the SNTS.
- 5.6. A carer to be present on every SNTS bus.

Post-school options, transitions and later year pathways for students with a disability

- 6.1. Systematic planning and resourcing, including modelling and planning for now and for future population increases, and possible increases in the number of students with special needs.
- 6.2. Increase the capacity of The Woden School to incorporate Year 11 & 12 to allow students with moderate needs to be able to continue their education in a safe, appropriate

Submission from the Special Education Advocacy Group (SEAG)

ACT Legislative Assembly Inquiry into the Needs of Students with Disability

environment that is conducive to their needs.

- 6.3. The provision of information to all students, parents and carers on the range of educational services available.
- 6.4. Provision of a career guidance counsellor and/or work placement officer who can provide work experience opportunities and other post school options for students with disabilities.

Resources and services

- 7.1. An increase in funding for the Assistive Technology service so technology supports can be sourced and purchased, with adequate training provided to teachers.
- 7.2. The development of a shared resource library and register to help facilitate access to equipment and assistive technologies.
- 7.3. Provision of a 'one-stop-shop' providing information for parents and carers about the range of government and non-government services available for people with a disability across all ages.
- 7.4. Increase the funding and capacity of services to minimise or eliminate extensive waiting lists to help address the unmet need for people with a disability.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Australia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) on 17 July 2008. The purpose of the UNCRPD is to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all people with disability, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity.

With reference to the education of people with disability. Article 24 of the UNCRPD states:

“People with disability have a right to education, like other people do. Countries are to make sure that their general education systems include people with disability at all levels and aim to allow the full development of a person’s potential.”

By virtue of the ratification, Australian governments and governmental entities (including the ACT government and ACT entities) are obliged to abide by the requirements of the UNCRPD.

It can be anticipated that, progressively, action will be taken at the national level to ensure that all Australian jurisdictions, and all Australian agencies, have law and practice that meets the standards and processes set out in the UNCRPD, and various other international instruments of relevance to disability to which Australia is a contracting state.

Currently, it would be fair to say that people with disabilities in the ACT do not have access to an education system that meets the requirements of the UNCRPD. Therefore, it would be a wise precaution for ACT education authorities, and other ACT authorities where appropriate, to set about the process, now, of identifying with some care what obligations arise under these instruments in relation to students with disabilities, and what action is needed to bring law and practice of ACT authorities into line with Convention requirements.

SEAG believe there would be interested persons in the ACT community, and in academia, who would be willing to help in this task on a pro-bono basis if ACT authorities made it clear that they accept the importance of the obligations arising under pertinent international instruments.

1. Community and Parental Perceptions, Attitudes and Experiences

1.1 Education

There are many mixed feelings, attitudes and experiences that parents and carers have in relation to the education of students with disabilities within the ACT. For many parents and carers, accessing services that support their children's education is a continual struggle.

For many parents and carers, there is a perception that, within ACT schools, there is an expectation of low achievement in learning when it comes to students with a disability. This culture must be replaced with an acknowledgement of the inalienable right of all students to have a positive and enriching educational experience. Educational goals for students with disabilities should be based on curriculum experiences that are the same, as or as close as possible to, those experiences and activities afforded to other students of a similar age.

“Students with disabilities and impairments should be engaged in activities that are appropriate for their chronological age” (From *Measuring Academic Progress Against Each KLA: Students with Disabilities and Impairments*, Department of Education, Employment and Training, Victoria, 200, page 14).

Many parents and carers with children who attend ACT special schools have noted that the time devoted to teaching students basic academic skills such as reading, writing and basic numeracy is grossly inadequate. Students who are quite capable of learning these skills are missing this opportunity due to too much time being spent pursuing “sheltered workshop” activities such as gardening, watching DVDs, swimming, and attending far too frequent excursions. Although some of these activities may be worthwhile in small doses, school activities should have a clearly defined educational outcome and not just be time-filling. The educational outcomes of activities should be clearly communicated to parents. This takes time and often teachers do not have the time. As suggested in the Shaddock Review, we must allow our teachers the time to do their job properly.

Many parents and carers feel that the expert knowledge they have of their child is not taken into consideration when planning their educational outcomes. In most special education settings an Individual Learning Plan (ILP) is developed that is supposed to look at the individual learning styles and needs of the students. This process can be severely hampered by teacher attitudes and understanding of particular programmes and different styles in delivery which can have serious detrimental effects to students learning outcomes.

Experiences have shown there are teachers who are not supportive of external tutoring programmes and do not reply to invitations to work collaboratively for the benefit of the student.

Example - An outside tutoring programme, endorsed and run by the ACT Department of Education and Training (DET), was not taken into consideration even when evidence of the benefits to the student was produced and the existing programme, which had not produced any significant results, was continued.

Submission from the Special Education Advocacy Group (SEAG)

ACT Legislative Assembly Inquiry into the Needs of Students with Disability

Educational outcomes that are offered to mainstream students are not always offered to students in ACT special schools or LSU units.

Example - Students in a high school special education setting do not have access to Career Guidance Counsellors, or work experience opportunities, however, the same services are available to students in mainstream high schools and colleges.

There is a lack of benchmark standards across special education in the ACT. Without measurable and achievable benchmarks it is not possible for teachers to measure and map students educational outcomes. Without some form of statement or certificate of attainment for students with special needs, there is no mechanism to guide the efficient and effective delivery of services that will maximise the educational outcomes for these students. Improvements in how the educational outcomes are delivered by use of new technologies and varying teacher styles would help a wide range of other mainstream students, not just students with disabilities.

1.2 Equal Opportunities

The Victorian Disability Action Plan states that one of its objectives is to promote recognition and acceptance that disability issues are considered as part of the core business by all areas of the department. This idea of “core business” is fundamental to the human rights of individuals with a disability.

The Victorian Action Plan also seeks to gain recognition and acceptance within the Department that “people with a disability have the same fundamental rights as people without a disability” (From the Disability Action Plan 2005-2008', Department of Education and Training, Victoria, page 16).

“Can my nine year old study a lesson on the same basis as your nine year old? Yes or no?
Discrimination or equal opportunity?”
Parent

2. Educational Outcomes

2.1 Social and Life Skills as Part of the Curriculum

Parents and carers have often voiced the need to introduce more appropriate social and life skills into the pedagogy for students with disabilities that require extra help in these areas. Specific lesson time needs to be factored into student's daily schedules to work on breaking down the different social skills or life skills that are required in every day life.

In particular, students with Autism experience difficulty understanding social rules, body language and expectations. This is more apparent in unstructured environments like the playground, shopping centres or any situation where there are no set routines.

Some students battle with abstract language and often take what is said literally. Lesson time to address these areas would not only benefit students now but for the rest of their lives. A lot of the social exposure students get at school cannot be duplicated at home, so it is imperative these skills are taught, and broken into steps, in the environment they are experienced.

Incorporating appropriate life and social skills into the curriculum is relevant to the lives and aspirations of students. A systematic approach, delivered over a significant period of time, is required to break down skills into meaningful and manageable groups. These skills need to be taught long enough, and in sufficient depth, to enable students to effectively use them in other environments. The benefits of this would be enormous, both in the school setting and into the students' future.

2.2 The Individual Learning Plan (ILP)

The goal of ACT education policies is to provide each student with a quality education, of which the first step is to decide on the curriculum, and the technologies and methodologies required to implement it. No one style of education will suit all students for cultural or other reasons therefore consultation is important. This is the intended role of the ILP.

At present the ILP is different in its design and process in each school setting. There is no formal training given to teachers on how to design or implement an ILP, or on the importance of the ILP. According to DET policy, ILPs are supposed to provide individual learning outcomes and adopt individual learning styles and plans to achieve their goals.

Example - Some parents and carers have reported ILPs prepared for their child have had the same learning outcomes for many years, and in some extreme cases, for the past 10 years.

A number of schools are not including goals developed in consultation with other services which students' access. Goals set by external therapeutic professionals such as Therapy ACT must be documented in the ILP, and implemented to ensure that learning outcomes are met.

ILPs should be properly monitored by DET, and teachers should be provided with appropriate training, and allocated appropriate time, for preparing a relevant ILP as it can be a complex and time consuming process. Schools should also be accountable for ILPs, including reporting to Government.

2.3 Pedagogy

Management of special education needs to be adjusted to encompass a student's needs. More emphasis should be placed on the delivery of a functional curriculum, and this curriculum must be made more relevant to students' needs and abilities. This will provide the student with skills required in life after school.

It also needs to take into account the chronological age of students. For example, high school age students whose literacy levels are in the lower percentile need to be not only given reading material that is appropriate to their reading levels, but also to their age and interests, and not material that is appropriate for students who are in lower primary school. Appropriate resources need to be considered as part of the ILP process and curriculum planning.

The adaptation of programme delivery to suit the individual learning styles of students is essential, including the use of visual, auditory or hands-on methods to help students reach their full potential. Realistic benchmarks also need to be set for each student and measured against nationally recognised guidelines.

Submission from the Special Education Advocacy Group (SEAG)

ACT Legislative Assembly Inquiry into the Needs of Students with Disability

A lot of mainstream pedagogy, such as scaffolding, is relevant to assisting special needs students. Teaching techniques have a common thread whether they are mainstream or in a special setting. They can be adapted and applied at different levels and delivered at varied paces in specialised settings. Good teaching in any setting should include a wide range of sensory inputs to cater for students who are more capable with some sensory inputs over others. A good teacher will teach to the appropriate level and pace of the students. This comes back to appropriate training for teachers and Learning Support Assistants (LSA). If teachers do not have appropriate specialised training, they are unable to make appropriate decisions relating to technique, pace and level.

Fundamental pedagogy such as the scaffolding approach is particularly useful. Scaffolding is a method that helps teachers to provide students with individualised instruction. While engaged in scaffolding, teachers become facilitators of learning in an instructional dialogue based on flexibility. Scaffolding fosters a student's academic achievement, self-esteem, and social skills. The objective of scaffolding is to give the student just enough support to help him or her achieve their current goal. Too much support can be stifling. Too little and the student will not progress. This method has a good track record across a broad range of students and educational areas. The resources teachers use must also reinforce the scaffolding approach. These can include a structured computer program, books, or props to aid learning.

DET must develop strategies, goals and policies specific to the pedagogy, mode of delivery and special education settings for individual students.

2.4 Teacher and LSA Training

One of the overall systemic issues in the education of students with a disability in the ACT is the insufficient training given to our teachers and LSA's. Appropriate training would enable them to deliver a meaningful programme to students that support their individual learning needs.

Teachers will come across many students with a disability throughout their teaching career. It is, therefore, imperative for our students that teachers and educators possess the appropriate knowledge and skills to enable students with a disability to reach their full potential.

Teachers must have a working and demonstrated knowledge of individual learning styles, and the ability to identify and apply adaptations to programme delivery. They should be capable of applying these adaptations, or source the appropriate resources to do so.

Teachers and LSAs must have adequate knowledge and skill levels to enable them to respond to the individual learning needs of students. This requires an understanding of particular stressors, obsessions and characteristics of individual students and working with them instead of against them.

There are many existing resources within the community that could be used to give current teachers and LSAs an understanding of the basic characteristics and behavioural triggers of students with various disabilities, including:

- Sexual Health & Family Planning ACT have a number of training packages such as Carer & Disability Worker Training and Workshops; So SAFE! Training & Schools Disability Program that cover these areas;
- Autism Asperger ACT provide an excellent DVD which should be compulsory viewing for all ACT teachers and LSAs;
- ACTION has a training package that is delivered to their drivers relating to mental health issues that could be adapted, and

Submission from the Special Education Advocacy Group (SEAG)

ACT Legislative Assembly Inquiry into the Needs of Students with Disability

- Fabric - developing a conducive environment for an ASD person.

Such training and understanding would also help others in contact with special needs students, such as other support staff within the school environment, staff within DET, and drivers and carers of special needs buses.

There is a real concern amongst parents that, in the current system, LSA's perform a wide variety of duties that they are either not qualified for or have insufficient training to perform. Currently LSA's, employed on a casual basis in mainstream schools, are required to take days off, without compensation and pay, to attend much-needed personal development and training. The introduction of mandatory training for LSA's, including those that are employed casually, paid for by DET is therefore necessary.

In some situations within mainstream schools, it would be appropriate for LSA's to spend time helping students who do not have special needs so that the teacher could spend more one-on-one time with the student who does have special needs.

2.5 Recommendations

- Teachers and LSA's should be paid higher rates and provided with other incentives to encourage staff to consider a career in special education as a respected, viable, rewarding and exciting specialisation.
- Look at the feasibility of introducing a core compulsory unit in special education into the ACT Teaching Degree that covers in detail:
 - Programme adaptation;
 - Characteristics of disabilities;
 - Social skilling awareness, and
 - ILP planning and implementation.
- Use of existing community resources to provide professional development for existing teachers and LSA's.
- The teaching of social and life skills be incorporated into the everyday curriculum encompassing the unstructured environments as well as the more formal settings.
- Implementation of student profiles that would be continuous and regularly updated, and would follow students through their school career.
- Promote continuity and accountability in the ILP process and for DET to be able to properly monitor the process.
- Development of nationally recognised guidelines and realistic benchmarks for students to be measured against.
- Provide a clause in the 'mobility' rotation of teachers to enable skilled teachers to remain in special education settings.
- Implement the Quality Teaching Model in special education settings within the ACT. The Quality Teaching Model has recently been implemented at Cranleigh School with great success, and to positive feedback from staff and parents. This model stems from a desire to see functional

literacy and numeracy become a reality for all students.

- Provide appropriate performance measures for staff and students, with mechanisms for evaluation of programs and student-related outcomes.
- Provision of appropriate educational settings and real options for students, their families, and their teachers to work together to provide a good education for all students with disabilities. This includes special needs schools, as well as learning support units within mainstream schools, as options for families within the ACT.

3. Findings of the Special Education Review for Students with Disabilities

The findings of the Special Education Review were broad in nature but made some very pertinent and valid points based on leading practices in Australia and internationally. Some of the excellent points it made were:

- The need to improve on what happens on a daily basis in individual classrooms for students with disabilities;
- The importance of training and up-skilling teachers and LSAs;
- The importance of skilled and informed leadership to be present at system and school levels, and
- The need to increase accountability for learning outcomes and linking these outcomes to existing ILPs.

It should be noted that SEAG agrees with these findings.

3.1 Service Agreements

Another good point that was highlighted in the report was exploring the possibilities of obtaining service agreements with specialist and therapist organisations, as was the need for revisiting the way resources are allocated and the various funding systems that are in place including the SCAN process.

3.2 Learning Support Coordinators (LSC)

Another good recommendation was to employ school-based Learning Support Coordinators (LSC) whose potential role would be invaluable to teachers, parents and students. This role could have a fundamental and practical case management role and is discussed further in Section 4.2

SEAG believes this is an excellent idea as it would improve the efficiency and delivery of education within our schools. This would also create more time for class room teacher to concentrate on their students.

3.3 Social and Life Skills

While pedagogy was discussed throughout this report not enough emphasis was placed on the importance of providing social and life skills as part of the everyday curriculum. Social skills is one area that is important and plays a prominent role in everyday life and a skill that many students (particularly those with ASD) find extremely difficult, but can be learned.

Promoting independence is another area (i.e. life skills) that could play a prominent role in educating students with a disability. Other important components that should be considered, where appropriate, as part of the everyday pedagogy for students with a disability are:

- Learning how to catch public transport, and
- Appropriate communication and interaction both in structured and unstructured environments.

The review talks about maintaining a mainstream pedagogy with adaptations but doesn't appear to consider that the skills listed above are just as important for the majority of students with a disability.

3.4 Staff Training

There were several sections in the report that referred to the importance of training teachers to teach in ways that more systematically enlist students in their own learning, and that provide adjustments in order for students to participate in education on the same basis as other students. It also talks about the importance of understanding the general characteristics of particular disabilities and how sometimes these behaviours have been misread due to a lack of understanding. SEAG supports these findings.

SEAG believes this is an area that **must be** addressed because without adequate teacher training students with disabilities, and other problems preventing learning, are not given the same opportunities as other mainstream students.

The introduction of a unit of special education into the teaching degree is essential and this should be considered as important as literacy and numeracy units. Specialist short courses should also be developed for all existing teachers, LSAs, and other staff interacting with students including DET staff and transport drivers/carers.

3.5 Communication

Communication was one area that was rarely mentioned in the report yet it is one of the most important components in the everyday life of all students, but is particularly important in the lives of students with a disability.

More emphasis needs to be placed on the importance of communication between teachers and teachers, teachers and parents and carers, principals and teachers, principals and parents and carers, and schools to the wider community. Too many times parents and carers are not informed of changes to staffing, school or class routines, curriculum development and the availability of services (e.g. bus schedules). At some special schools external services are utilised and programmes are run within school time but parents are unaware of these programmes, and how

they might benefit the students. This removes any choice a parent has for their child to be able to participate in such a programme. For example, a mentoring program that promotes friendship and social skills run by youth centres (which have limited numbers).

It is often very difficult to get information about a student's day at school from the student themselves for a number of reasons. This can be distressing and emotionally draining for parents and carers when a student arrives home upset or angry with no apparent explanation. Most schools do provide a communication book but many parents have found them to be inadequate in terms of providing valuable information.

3.6 Community Concern

There are real concerns in the community, that the findings, issues and recommendations of the report may be considered too difficult to implement by the relevant authorities and/or Government. Therefore the areas that have been identified for improvement and/or change will not occur and nothing will change for students with a disability within the ACT.

3.7 Recommendations

- Implement service agreements with specialist and therapist organisations.
- Investigate more effective and efficient ways of allocating resources to support students with a disability.
- Review of funding systems that are in place including the SCAN process.
- Employ school-based Learning Support Coordinators (LSC).
- Teaching of social and life skills to students with a disability.
- The introduction of a unit of special education into the teaching degree.
- Specialist short courses be developed for all existing principals, teachers, LSAs, and other staff interacting with students with a disability.
- More emphasis to be placed on the importance of communication between teachers and teachers, teachers and parents and carers, principals and teachers, principals and parents and carers, and schools to the wider community

4. Provision of Services to Support the Educational Needs of Students with a Disability

4.1 In-School Therapy and Support Services

There is little doubt that the provision of therapy and support services within the school environment would be enormously beneficial to students with a disability. Therapists must be school-based, and able to service a cluster place at the school for as many days as is appropriate

Submission from the Special Education Advocacy Group (SEAG)

ACT Legislative Assembly Inquiry into the Needs of Students with Disability

for demand. This is similar to the way in which school counsellors operate. The present situation simply doesn't deliver what is intended for a number of reasons, including:

- A lack of resources within Therapy ACT to provide useful therapeutic services to all students who require such, and
- The removal of children from school to access a therapist is disruptive to the child and the school. It also requires parents and carers to be present. Many children are adversely affected by changes in routine. This could be minimised by therapists visiting the school.

4.2 Learning Support Coordinators (LSC)

One of the options set out in the Special Education Review was to employ Learning Support Coordinators (LSC). Having a designated LSC in the system would enable the facilitation and implementation of educational plans, monitoring, reviewing and evaluating progress against the established goals for educational and whole-of-life outcomes. They would then be able to advise of any changes or improvements to services and establish review points to support this process. This position could also provide assistance to parents with applications to charities for funds to buy expensive wheelchairs, hoists, and other necessary equipment. This role could also have a fundamental and practical case management role in providing:

- Current best practice;
- Curriculum adaptation;
- Coordination of therapists and resources, and
- Up to date student profiles that could include behavioural and/or learning strategies.

Providing a student profile would help inform the ILP process and could be used to measure and monitor individual progress against set goals. It would incorporate tried and tested strategies, and provide important information regarding the students needs. This would also provide a formal recording mechanism and promote continuity, transparency and accountability in the ILP process. More importantly it would give teachers valuable information and prevent time being wasted on retrying strategies and could be continuous and regularly updated, and would follow students through their entire school career. The LSC role could also be fundamental in transitions and career development including, where appropriate, organising work experience for students.

4.3 Non-governmental Evaluation Panel

The engagement of panels of professionals, who are independent of government departments and agencies, would provide an objective assessment of what resources students' need to maximise their educational outcomes. These professionals must have expertise in the student's area of disability in order to be able to assess the student's needs and formulate best practice educational models and education plans. This ensures optimal educational and whole-of-life outcomes for each student. This process should be conducted in partnership with parents, carers, therapists, educators, and the student wherever practicable, and occur at regular review points so the expert panels can formally evaluate progress and programs.

4.4 Assistive Technology Team

Increasing the resources and the capacity of the Assistive Technology team will allow them to be involved in programme delivery and planning. Currently the team is too small to service their brief of facilitating access to curriculum and learning for students with diverse learning needs. This team needs to be part of the process of curriculum design and review.

4.5 Specialised Wheelchair Technicians

The recruitment of specialised wheelchair technicians to carry out adjustments and repairs to equipment, will remove this duty from occupational therapists. Incidental roles now account for up to 65% of their time (from Canberra Time Article 10 May 2009, regarding ACT Health's draft report on the ACT Government Disability Equipment Scheme). This is an inefficient use of their skills and deprives students of much needed services to assist them in their development. It is also an ineffective application of their specialised training.

4.6 External Therapists and Professionals Policy

The development of a policy within DET to allow students' access to external therapists and professionals in all school settings. In some settings, principals are hindering the ability of a therapist to provide services to children within the school.

4.7 In-school Para-professionals

Provide funding to recruit in-school para-professionals who have the training and expertise to execute programs as developed by therapists. Therapy ACT resources are inadequate for the current level of demand for therapeutic services.

5. Transport for Students with a Disability

There is a strong feeling among parents and carers who utilise the Special Needs Transport Scheme (SNTS), that SNTS management believe access to this service is a privilege. However, many parents and carers believe it is a right to have access to this service, and SNTS management should reflect this attitude.

There is also a strong feeling amongst parents and carers that too much responsibility is placed on the drivers of buses within the SNTS, and that each bus should have a carer as well as a driver for safety and management of student behaviour.

There have been incidents reported by parents and carers that have caused their child considerable stress. These incidents could have been avoided, or addressed in an appropriate manner, if the driver and/or carer had received some basic training in the general characteristics of certain disabilities. Similarly, the same training should be made available to taxi drivers who do school runs. A child on the autism spectrum can become anxious if the same route is not taken and in some cases if they do not have the same taxi driver.

Example - A driver turned up the radio because he liked the song, not knowing that the

Submission from the Special Education Advocacy Group (SEAG)
ACT Legislative Assembly Inquiry into the Needs of Students with Disability

sudden increase in volume could cause stress to the student, who was autistic. The student then becomes loud and disruptive, which in turn upset and distracted the driver as well as the other students on the bus. This situation could have easily been avoided by the driver informing the students he was going to turn up the radio before actually doing.

Other concerns that have been raised are:

- The amount of time some students spend travelling on the bus;
- Provide a mechanism, on a regular basis, for parents and carers to feedback about their experiences of the SNTS;
- The fact there are no ACTION school bus services that stop at any of the special schools in Canberra, and
- Students attending an integration support system in a mainstream school are not eligible to receive transport even if the school placement is outside of their zoned area.

5.1 Recommendations

- Review the current SNTS, including:
 - a review of the facilities on school buses;
 - the length of time students are on the bus both morning and afternoon (some students can be on the bus for an hour and a half each way), and
 - the timing of pick up and drop off. Parents often have other school children to consider.
- ACTION provides a school bus service that has the option of stopping at all special schools in Canberra, allowing students the same basic rights to public transport as their mainstream school age peers.
- Arrangement for professional training for drivers and carers including:
 - an understanding of the basic characteristics of students with a disability;
 - behavioural triggers and management techniques. The more information and understanding carers and drivers possess the more likely they are to be able to understand specific behaviours, their triggers and be able to support appropriate positive outcomes.
- Regular consultation through a survey would provide an opportunity to DET to ensure the SNTS is meeting the needs of all the stakeholders involved. It would also provide the opportunity to identify any issues, evaluate current practices and provide a mechanism for feedback, allowing for possible ideas and solutions to be shared. This would result in the ability to provide better planning and efficiency of services, leading to higher satisfaction for all stakeholders. It would also provide DET a way of measuring performance target areas within the SNTS.
- A carer to be present on every SNTS. Without a carer on each bus the driver is not only responsible for driving the bus but also has the responsibility for each of the students. This is seen by parents and carers as a serious safety concern.

6. Post-school Options, Transitions and Later Year Pathways for Students with a Disability

6.1 Access to Years 11 and 12 for Students with a Disability

There are currently no appropriate placements available for students, in a safe and supportive environment which is conducive to their continued education, and who have moderate learning and behavioural needs, in Years 11 and 12. Current options and existing models for Years 11 and 12 don't cover the full spectrum of needs for students with disabilities, and leaves students with moderate needs no appropriate alternatives.

Students with high needs are able to access Black Mountain School, and students with low needs are able to access learning support units within mainstream colleges. However, Black Mountain School currently is only able to offer small numbers due to limited building and space capacity. For most students with moderate to high needs, learning support units have already been seen as an inappropriate option.

There is also new legislation that has been recently passed in the ACT, relating to the increase of the compulsory school leaving age from 15 to 17 and has implications for students with a disability. Increasing the capacity of The Woden School appears to be a reasonable solution to this problem and has the support of the School Board, teachers and parents and carers. SEAG also support this proposed solution.

Currently there are no opportunities for students in special schools to access a career guidance officer or work placement officer, unlike students in mainstream high schools and colleges who have access to such services. To ensure students at special schools have access to the same services available in mainstream schools, a dedicated Work Placement Officers role needs to be created within DET. The role would look at access to, or provision of, career guidance and work placement opportunities for all students with a disability starting from year 9 and continuing through to Year 12. This would help promote and support options and opportunities for all transition periods, particularly information regarding post school options.

6.2 Recommendations

- Systematic planning and resourcing, including modelling and planning for now and for future population increases, and possible increases in the number of students with special needs.
- Increase the capacity of The Woden School to incorporate Year 11 & 12 to allow students with moderate needs to be able to continue their education in a safe, appropriate environment that is conducive to their needs.
- The provision of information to all students, parents and carers on the range of educational services available.
- Provision of a career guidance counsellor and/or work placement officer who can provide work experience opportunities and other post school options for students with disabilities.

7. Resources and Services

7.1 Assistive Technology

Resources within the school environment for students with a disability have two major problems:

1. The Inclusive Technology team has insufficient resources and funding to adequately meet the needs of students with a disability across the ACT. An increase in funding for this service is imperative so technology supports can be sourced and purchased, with adequate training provided to teachers until these systemic adaptations are in place.
2. The development of a shared resource library and register to help facilitate access to equipment and assistive technologies to be readily available and accessible to all students with a disability in all educational settings across Canberra.

7.2 Centralisation of Disability Services

It is extremely difficult for parents and carers to navigate their way around the myriad of services that are available for people with a disability. There is no one stop central location where parents and carers can gain information about respite, and other programmes that are available to people with a disability. It is a fact that many parents and carers find out about a service that may have been beneficial to their child, years too late to be of any help. In most instances parents and carers hear of a service via word of mouth from other parents and carers.

It would be beneficial if a Government organisation such as ACT Disability was to investigate the feasibility of providing a 'one-stop-shop' of information for parents and carers about the range of government and non-government services available for people with a disability across all ages. It is a matter of providing **all** the information, that already exists in a fragmented form, and bringing it to the people.

7.3 Future Funding of Disability Services

Monitoring, evaluation and planning needs to be included in future ACT budgets to increase the funding and capacity of services that have extensive waiting lists to help address the unmet need for people with a disability.

8. SCAN and School-based Management

The Student Centred Appraisal of Needs (SCAN) in its current format is one of deficit base, on what students cannot do. This process does not follow stated objectives of ACT Public Schools in *Students with a Disability: Meeting their Educational Needs*, which states

"establish and maintain a supportive school environment for students with a disability and promote positive attitudes towards students with a disability within the school community".

Submission from the Special Education Advocacy Group (SEAG)

ACT Legislative Assembly Inquiry into the Needs of Students with Disability

Students should be able to receive the same resources, with an appraisal process that is positive and supportive, rather than a deficit-based process that can often be a negative experience for parents and carers.

This process, or any successor, has to be transparent and accessible. Currently there is little transparency and accountability.

It has been reported by some parents that the point/hours that have been allocated through the SCAN process are not always allocated to the particular student. School-based management has a number of implications for how students with a disability are supported. If a child is in the Inclusion Support Program in a mainstream school it means that a principal can use the funding at his or her discretion. Parents have been told that the funding is used, not only for support in the classroom but also, for professional development and administration. As there is not an accountability process in place, it is unclear how the funding is directly benefitting the child's learning and progress. This problem is also common to the ESL (English as a Second Language) area and special schools.

School-based Management has also posed a problem for some in relation to the delivery of therapy services in schools. The therapist is required to organise a time to visit the school with either the class teacher or the principal. In some instances this has proved ineffective as calls from therapists have not been returned. This means either the student receives little or no therapy services at all.

9. Learning Support Assistants (LSA)

The role of an LSA is to support the teacher in a number of ways and, where necessary, provide one-on-one support to the child. In some instances LSA's are being told to adapt and deliver the curriculum to the student with a disability.

Example - One parent told us that her child had spent half of Year 1 sitting in a corridor with an LSA who was acting as his teacher. The LSA was not qualified to be delivering the curriculum and was left to her own devices. In year 3 the same child spent a lot of time in another room with the LSA as the teacher, who could not be bothered with dealing with him. The LSA was handed the class work and told "this is what we are doing - you modify it for Joe".

In many cases students with a disability in mainstream schools need far more assistance than they are allocated. This results in the child struggling in the class, suffering from elevated anxiety, and creating more difficult problems. Bullying of these children is common at all levels, which also escalates the child's anxiety at coping by themselves in class and in the playground.

10. Planning for Special Needs Education

Information collected on the severity of student's disabilities allows a plan to be developed for student's classes and environments that is appropriate for the student's ability. This plan development needs to be carried out in a systematic way that ensures resourcing and modelling for the present, and for future population increases of students with disabilities, thus providing adequate funding to meet the projected needs of those populations.

Submission from the Special Education Advocacy Group (SEAG)
ACT Legislative Assembly Inquiry into the Needs of Students with Disability

The disability criterion needs to be reviewed to consider the inclusion of other types of disabling conditions (e.g. ADHD and dyslexia) which is not currently included in the definition.

Some students from learning support units are experiencing problems with the availability of equipment, and some have even had equipment withdrawn as a punishment for behavioural issues.

Planning and appropriate funding also need to be available for costly equipment such as hoists, water beds, and slings. The current funding is inadequate for requirements.