

Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs
ACT Legislative Assembly
GPO Box 1020
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Inquiry into the needs of ACT students with a disability

The Association of Independent Schools of the ACT is pleased to provide this submission to the above Inquiry, in support of ACT students with a disability.

We represent all of Canberra's seventeen independent schools, with one in five students in the ACT attending an independent school.

AISACT supports diversity of education within and across the independent, Catholic systemic and Government sectors in the ACT.

AISACT believes that governments should base public funding of independent schools on four key principles – stability; reasonable basic entitlement; needs-based funding; and annual indexation. Our submission focuses on the third element, as well as initial comments on the Review into Special Education (also known as the Shaddock Review).

Students with disability can have very high-level needs for classroom support, specialist teachers and facilities. These needs are met with substantial funding and services if a student attends a government school. However AISACT believes that if all students with disability are to achieve their educational goals, government funding and services should be accessible no matter which schools they attend.

These comments formed the basis of our discussion with the Committee earlier this year at the hearings for the Inquiry into the Educational Gap in the ACT.

Funding should be directed to the student based on their level of need firstly irrespective of what school they attend; and not based on what type of school (government or non-government) they attend and THEN their level of need.

Funding for non-government students with disability is capped at \$1.5 million annually from the ACT Government; though we note, this increased in recent years – but not from new funding from the Government. This figure should also be viewed in the context of the savings to the ACT Government of non-government schools (whose enrolments comprise over forty percent of all ACT students) which is \$280 million each year.

According to the ACT Schools Census of February 2009, there were over 400 students with disability in non-government schools. This has risen from 297 to 411 since 2005 to 2009 – an increase of nearly forty percent.

The recently-released Review into Special Education, notes (p. 151) “it is certainly true that students with a disability, like all students in Independent schools and Catholic schools, receive less public support than if they were in a Public school. The case for Governments to provide more funding for students with a disability irrespective of the sector in which the students is educated is frequently debated. The consensus of opinion is that increased funding is needed in all sectors.”

We support increased funding for all students with disability – irrespective of the school they attend.

At the time of writing (late December 2009), our Board had not yet met to discuss the Shaddock Review, which was only released last week. However, some initial thoughts on the Review are, we believe, pertinent to this Inquiry.

Firstly, we’re pleased that the Review was extended to include non-government schools and believes that the Review has been strengthened by the inclusion of the Catholic and Independent sectors, which combined, comprise nearly half of the students in the ACT.

We agree with the Review’s comment (p. 15) that the suggestions in the report are “options for the future” and note the advice in the Review not to use the report as a checklist. We’ll be encouraging independent schools to consider the Review and its suggestions and how they could implement the ideas outlined.

The Review which is detailed, thorough and academically rigorous makes some important points, including that independent – and Catholic systemic and public schools – are supporting students, parents, and families well. For example, in independent schools, the Review notes that there was support for the Review; that there’s good communication between schools and parents; that there’s flexibility and creativity in the way services are provided with a focus on the ‘whole person; and that school cultures are inclusive.

The Review’s assertion that the “most important contribution...is to improve what happens on a daily basis in individual classrooms (p. 15) rightly focuses attention on practice in classrooms. The Review has considered this in depth and we will be framing our discussions with our principals in this context in 2010.

We also note the strong emphasis for improved cross-sector (and in our case intra-sector) collaboration in a variety of areas, including parental support, professional

development and raising awareness of legislative requirements. Initial informal discussions with the ACT Department of Education and Training and the Catholic Education Office point to areas of further possible cooperation.

The Review is sensible and balanced and provides for a basis of discussion within and cross the three sectors in going forward and supporting even further students, parents and families, with the notion of an “educational tide that lifts all boats” having merit. This is the challenge that the Review’s authors have put to everyone involved in ACT education – and it is one which deserves full and serious consideration.

Finally, the Review also highlights the desire of people working in the wider education sector to do better – that we can do better – and we want to do better.

The learnings, suggestions and reflections from the Review will be taken by the Association of Independent Schools of the ACT in that context, which was the basis for us seeking an extension to the Review in the first instance.

We would welcome an opportunity to meet with the Committee if convenient. I can be contacted at director@ais.act.edu.au or on 6162 0834 for an appearance at the hearings to be arranged.

The Association thanks the Committee for its work in this critical area of education and looks forward to its report.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Jeremy Irvine', with a stylized flourish extending from the end.

Jeremy Irvine
Executive Director
22 December 2009