

ACT Disability Advisory Council

Needs of ACT Students with a Disability

Submission from the Disability Advisory Council

Contents

1. Community and parental experiences, satisfaction and attitudes	4
2. Educational outcomes	6
3. Provision of services such as therapy and transport	9
4. Post school options, transition and pathways for students with a disability	10
5. Any other related matters	11

The Disability Advisory Council was established in May 2003 to independently advise and make recommendations to the ACT Minister for Disability across a range of issues in relation to people with disability in the ACT. The Council has representation from a broad cross section of the disability community as well as from Disability ACT and the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

The Council has broad Terms of Reference and is tasked with: advising the Minister on disability issues; working in partnership with Disability ACT on key activities; communicating the needs of people with disability and their families and carers; and establishing links with interstate Disability Councils.

The Disability Advisory Council appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission into the Inquiry into the Needs of ACT Students with a Disability. Anecdotal evidence indicates that ACT students with a disability experience an unacceptable level of unmet need. This disparity prevents students with a disability in achieving academic and social parity without significant, individualised support.

The Disability Advisory Council's response to the Terms of Reference is purposely generic. This is to allow for circumstances and situations beyond Council's purview and collective experience. Nevertheless, we believe this submission reflects a cogent view that best represents the view of parents, students and educationalists within the ACT.

The experiences in this submission are inclusive of all educational settings available to students with a disability in the ACT, including mainstream classroom settings, learning support units and special schools. Experiences for students with a disability vary from setting to setting, with the success of the setting dependant on;

- level and quality of assistance provided;
- schooling environment and ethos;
- experience of the teacher and support staff, and;
- school community.

It should also be noted that many schools and teachers are doing a wonderful job in educating students with a disability, with their commitment and passion to teaching a epitomising a dedication to quality education. The work that they undertake should be both recognised and applauded.

The Disability Advisory Council looks forward to the outcome of this inquiry.

Trevor Robinson

Chair

ACT Disability Advisory Council

1. Community and parental experiences, satisfaction and attitudes

1.1 Resources for inclusive schools

Some parents have expressed their disappointment in mainstream schools and are now educating their children in segregated schools even though this was not their preferred choice. Some parents stated that schools that claimed to be inclusive are in reality practicing methods of segregating students from their peers. Parents feel that the reason for this segregation is because of a lack of funding, deficient professional development and inadequate support from executive staff.

Additionally, Learning Support Assistants (LSA) seem to be an undervalued resource and are sometimes not incorporated into the Individual Learning Plan (ILP) process. This emphasises the importance of teachers developing skills in managing other staff in a school time frame that rarely allows full explanation of how to work with students. It seems apparent the opportunity for teachers to liaise with the LSA allocated to the room is limited, particularly when the LSA roster changes daily.

Recommendation

The Disability Advisory Council recommends that all schools be appropriately resourced to meet the individual needs of students with a disability. Parents should have a direct input into how the funding for their child is spent. If schools are well resourced, children will be able to attend the school of their choice and reach their full potential.

Teacher professional development should be tailored to individual students to gain ideas on how to best teach each student. Council highly recommends that LSAs are also provided comparable training.

Each LSA should undergo rigorous induction that prepares them up for a greater understanding of inclusive teaching methods. This would free up teachers, many of whom have limited time to educate LSA's as well as their students. These inclusive methods would include:

- The role of the LSA;
- The use of people first language(e.g. a child with Down syndrome rather than a Down syndrome child);
- An understanding of how to initiate play with students with a disability;
- Gain strategies to manage undesirable or errant behaviour (discouraging the use of 'no').

1.2 Resources and funding

Whilst many parents of children with a disability have chosen to educate their children at their local schools, this is not always possible at every location, due to lack of funding and resources available. When a child with high support needs attends a mainstream school, the highest level of support that will be allocated to the school is 50%, which is then up to the school's discretion on how to utilise. This may be used as support in the classroom where one LSA supports the classroom teacher for part of the day. Some schools shuffle LSA's rosters around, preventing continuity for the teacher, requiring constant adjustment on how the teacher manages support in the classroom.

This concept is flawed, as the teacher does not have the time to consult with each LSA. If a teacher requires a student with a disability to be supported in literacy, a considerable briefing is required with the LSA to discuss the student needs. With up to 29 other students in the class, this is an onerous and unrealistic expectation. It seems clear mainstream schools are being set up to fail children with a disability as they are under funded while segregated

schools are channelled ratio's of 2 or more adults to 5 children. This ratio is bound to ensure sound academic learning, which leads to the question of why mainstream schools are left to struggle.

Recommendation

Our recommendation would be that resources are increased to mainstream schools. If there is a student in the classroom with a disability the teacher should have a permanent LSA. Let the ACT be a leader in supporting children with a disability to succeed in mainstream settings.

We would also recommend the department look closely at the movement of children that have started in a mainstream setting then moved into a segregated setting and delve into the reasons behind this move and act accordingly.

2. Educational outcomes

Many students with a disability have no real educational outcomes as society views education. In some instances there appears to be no accountability to actually educate students with significant disability because sometimes ideology sets them into their own separate "they have a disability" society and they are not expected to contribute to normal society anyway.

Some students with a disability do not learn what their peers do, no history, no science or other subjects or topics outside of what it is assumed they can learn; sometimes educators do not believe students with significant disability can actually learn complex themes. There are many examples of people with a disability who have been educated with the same measure of education other members of society take for granted and are very successful along their chosen path. Equality demands all students have the same educational opportunities, and that our government become accountable to educate them appropriately.

2.1 Individual Learning Plans

After consultation with families of children with a disability that attend both inclusive schools and schools in segregated settings it was apparent the use of Individual Learning Plans (ILP's) is currently ineffective. Some families only attended one ILP meeting per year. This only provides an opportunity for broad long term goals to be set.

An ILP has the potential to be an extremely valuable tool for teachers. If an ILP meeting is held frequently, perhaps once a term, smaller achievable academic, social, physical and health and safety goals can be realised. More frequent ILP's will provide teachers with a holistic picture of each student with a disability for each term where high expectations can be attained with appropriate scaffolding in accordance to each individual's potential.

ILP's can be a valuable opportunity for teachers, parents, principals, learning support assistants and the child with a disability to meet and discuss individual goals. As communication is often problematic between all parties within the school environment, ILP's can guarantee in depth discussion at least once a term.

The measuring and monitoring of individual learning plans for accountability gives a student and their family an assurance that the goals set down for them to reach are being learnt and built upon. Individual learning plans work on paper but lack practice. Having a good teacher can open a student's future as they do maintain the goals for the year, while other students fall behind and their individual learning plans are lost amongst the chaos of understaffing and pedagogy.

It is worth noting that the 2008 DET External Validation Report stated:

Special schools have begun to aggregate student achievement data in relation to goals achieved in Individual Learning Plans. Further work in this area would enable more effective monitoring and reporting of student achievement (page 5).

Recommendation

It would be recommended that ILP meetings to be held with all stakeholders once each term if this is the wish of the parents/guardians. The frequency of the ILP meetings could be negotiated with the parents; however a minimum of two meetings per year to set goals should be encouraged. Additionally, Council recommends that small, achievable goals be set within an achievable academic standard.

2.2 Raising academic expectations

Some families consulted have been disappointed in their child's education as the academic expectations have been low. As a result parents often become the educators which place great stress on family life. Schools should be held accountable for the educational outcomes of all students with a disability. If a particular teaching method is not working teachers should recognise this then seek an alternative. Ask parents, as they are usually the best resource, or

network with associations related to the students' disability to source the best practice of teaching to help the student reach their full potential.

Recommendation

That all schools should be accountable for the education of students with a disability, including open reporting on the academic outcomes of students.

2.3 Curriculum and pedagogy

Although the ACT curriculum does encompass a broad scope of skills which can be taught it can also place a child into a certain box. Curriculum sets down what can and cannot be taught and so a student is assessed as being able to learn certain skills, if a student does not fit into one box they are placed into another depending on how they measure up to what curriculum says.

Some areas of the curriculum being taught in special settings do not have significant positive learning outcomes. Students may never have the opportunity to flourish as they are kept within their certain box of what is expected of a student with a certain level of disability. This can be determined by certain teachers who do look outside the curriculum box and explore inventive ways to teach. A student may never reach their true potential within a special school setting, while being deemed to have a too severe physical disability to attend a mainstream school they are being undervalued by being only taught life skills, which are important, but a real education is just as important.

Society has stereotypical views of education of a student with a disability. Society has categorised them into a label of having "special needs", yes they may have "special needs" but that does not mean they cannot be educated. Pedagogy can keep students from breaking out of the being "uneducable" mindset. Pedagogy of students with a disability is a disabled pedagogy and it labels these students again.

Recommendation

Pedagogy needs to be broadened to focus and aim at giving students a real idea of their world and life possibilities and not just life skills. Pedagogy needs to incorporate both life skills and mainstream educational ideals.

2.4 Appropriate college placements for students with a moderate intellectual disability

Currently within the ACT, students with a moderate intellectual disability are either offered a place in a learning support unit (such as Canberra College) or Black Mountain College (if you are successful in gaining a place). It has been the experience of parents that College learning support units are only appropriate for students who have a mild intellectual disability - students are expected to be able to travel on public transport independently and possess skills like being able to read the time (to move between classes independently and to follow a school timetable).

For example whilst Black Mountain School accepts enrolments from students who have a moderate, profound or severe disability - the majority of students do have a profound or severe disability. Consequently, a student with a moderate disability can be placed into a classroom where they are the only student who has verbal or literacy skills. This means that they have nobody to talk or socialise with and the enhancement of reading and writing skills is not a priority. This can mean that existing skills can be diminished, skills that often took an enormous amount of time to learn in the first instance.

Recommendation

There needs to be suitable college placements for students with a moderate disability so that existing skills can be enhanced and new skills developed.

2.5 Assessment of student's abilities

There appears to be a lack of true assessment of a student's abilities. There needs to be more recognition and development of a student's abilities. Everyone has different learning styles, and while we recognise them in students who are being educated, we fail to accord a student with a disability that same courtesy. If we took the time to attribute each student with individuality we would find a wealth of information pertaining to how they learn and taking the time is the key. They become trapped inside an approach to education that needs to be taken to another level.

Students have abilities that are never discovered or are uncovered when they are older; this sets them behind countless years, when the ability could have been developed into a fulfilling future for them. Assessment should be continual because sometimes one discovered ability can later uncover another or a student develops over their lifetime. Giving these students a real education becomes the responsibility of the family instead of the responsibility being placed where it should, with government.

Recommendation

That government to develop new approaches to the education of a student with a disability which focus on their abilities not their disability.

3. Provision of services such as therapy and transport

3.1 Therapists

The lack of therapists and the constant churn of therapists have a detrimental effect on a student's overall performance. There needs to be consistency with therapists, this also includes transition periods – such as changing schools. The student should be able to maintain a regular therapist that understands their individual needs. There is a strong potential for students to lose skills when they have a changeover of therapist, especially one they have had for a number of years.

Some students do not receive any therapy, due to waiting lists; this can cause a disability to slowly deteriorate over time if not treated appropriately. Lack of and changing therapists causes students to be left with no equipment or unsuitable equipment because a therapist does not know a student well enough. Suitable equipment again can cause improvement or detrimental effects.

Recommendation

Students would be able to maintain contact with a particular therapist, where practical, during transition times.

More funding is required to ensure that all students with a disability have access to appropriate and timely therapy services.

3.2 Learning Support Assistants

The insufficient number of Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) to the ratio of students puts more pressure on teachers which in turn causes them to focus less on individual learning plan outcomes. LSAs are very valuable to a teacher, when there is not enough help within the classroom the teacher must take over a LSA's role and then their time is taken up caring for students instead of focusing on ways to enable students to reach the individual learning plan outcomes.

In mainstream schools the insufficient number of LSAs to students can inhibit a student's ability to move out of a learning support unit into a mainstream classroom, thus limiting their social inclusion and academic advancement.

Recommendation

A review needs to be conducted to ensure that all students are appropriately supported by LSAs to achieve their social and academic goals. The Disability Advisory Council recommends that universities facilitate work placements for students studying a Bachelor of Education degree to gain work experience as a LSA. This will give them valuable insight of working with students with a disability as well as alleviate the lack of LSA's in the field.

3.3 Transport

Expensive, inappropriate or non-existent transport means no school, socialisation, and stimulation, contributing to isolation and poor learning environments. Accessing special needs transport does not suit all students, and sometimes ACTION buses are already full in certain areas. The lack of accessible taxis and other forms of accessible transport again places the responsibility upon an already overburdened family to transport the student themselves which is not always practical. Some students do not attend their local school, along with their siblings, so families struggle to get all students to different schools on time.

Recommendation

Greater access to accessible transport for students with a disability to permit families access to the school of their choice.

4. Post school options, transition and pathways for students with a disability

4.1 School leaving age

Many parents are concerned about the Department of Education and Training lowering the leaving age for students with a disability. Presently, students at Black Mountain can stay at school until year 13 - or the year that students turn 20 - this will be changing so that students leave the year that they turn 18.

Currently there are limited options for students with a disability when they leave school. Employment can be difficult to obtain, many students require a high level of support, other post school options can be inaccessible due to lack of post school options support – both financially and places available.

This lack of post school options can lead to life at home which becomes isolating, parents that were working having to cease employment to care for their young adult. Students and families find themselves pushed out of society as a whole as the young adult is forced to remain at home. They are now isolated after spending twelve or more years receiving stimulation etc and are now more prone to suffer mental health issues, have behavioural issues and usually have a marked increase in the level of additional care required by the families.

Recommendation

That students' with a disability are able to remain at school for an extended time if they do not have an appropriate place to transition to such as employment, further study or post school option program.

4.2 Future pathways and support services

The lack of support services to enable students to transition into future pathways leaves them with no future pathways. Sometimes they have no options or choices; they are placed wherever there is room whether the placement is truly appropriate for where the student wants to go. Support services need to be life long not just during school life, this makes it nearly impossible for a student to continue with education or go along another path such as art or music.

Recommendation

The Disability Advisory Council recommends that outside services come into schools and discuss future options with families and individuals with a disability. This will raise individuals and families awareness of possibilities and to concentrate on student's strengths and interests.

5. Any other related matters

5.1 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with disability

Indigenous Education Officers rarely visit schools or learning support units for students with a disability. There are insufficient numbers of dedicated, trained Indigenous Education Officers (IEOs) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with a disability and their families and carers. This is especially relevant for navigating the post-school options maze.

There are a significant number of reports that highlights the educational "gap" between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students and all other students. The DET Annual Report 2007-08 states that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students "*generally are over-represented in the lower 50 percent of students in literacy and numeracy strands*". The Report goes on to say that an additional \$3.3m was committed to a suite of initiatives designed to improve learning outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The remarkable aspect of this is that not one single dollar was/is targeted towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students with a disability. This so-called "suite" of initiatives does not have one single program that is specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students with a disability.

Indeed this rather comprehensive "suite" of initiatives not only ignores students who attend special education schools, it also ignores the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with a disability who attend mainstream schools. This gives the perception that policy and program developers think that this particular "gap" is just too wide to attempt to close.

Activities developed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students must be inclusive of all students. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with a disability are rarely invited to sporting events or celebratory events such as NAIDOC or reconciliation activities. Cultural and community inclusiveness is essential to foster a sense of belonging and to develop networks. The bottom line is this: if a program or activity is being conducted for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students - then it must include everyone. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with a disability are unquestionably one of the most vulnerable groups of people in society, being part of community helps to alleviate this vulnerability.

The ACT Department of Education is able to identify (and therefore count) the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who attend Special Schools. However, the Department is currently not able to identify the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with a disability who attend learning support classrooms or mainstream classrooms. This has clear policy, program, service and funding implications for those students.

Recommendation

There needs to be an increase in the numbers of dedicated, trained Indigenous Education Officers (IEOs) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with a disability and their families and carers.

This "suite" of initiatives developed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students must be inclusive of all students. Activities must be developed to address the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with a disability.

The department must seek to identify the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with a disability who attend learning support classrooms or mainstream classrooms.

5.2 Students with a disability falling through the gaps

Anecdotal evidence supports that too many students with a disability are falling through the gaps not only in the education system, but also post school.

Focusing on real education incorporated with current curriculum gives us a complete system that ensures these students are being offered the same opportunities as their peers. It is vital they are educated properly, assessed properly and their potentials are addressed and something is done with that knowledge to ensure appropriate outcomes.

Recommendation

Processes must be put in place to prevent students with a disability from falling through gaps in both the education and post school systems.