

Parliamentary Inquiry into Students with Special Needs or Disability in New South Wales

APRIL 3 2017

The NSW Parliament has opened an inquiry into students with special needs or disability in NSW. Family Advocacy Senior Systemic Advocate, Meg Clement-Couzner, entered a submission to the inquiry and attended the hearing, with Family Advocacy Member, Yolande Cailly, to provide evidence and answer questions about the inclusive nature of the NSW education system.

Yolande and Meg presented evidence that demonstrated for over 25 years, families of people with disability saw their children, grandchildren and siblings living separate, institutionalised lives. Vulnerable people being grouped with other people with disability, people with whom they might have nothing in common beyond a diagnosis, and whose vulnerabilities, when grouped together, were compounded.

These beloved family members were on a separate pathway from the beginning – the special medical language in the hospital, doctors responding with grief and dire warnings instead of joy to the birth; 'special' early therapies; the 'special school', which they might go to on a 'special bus'; later the special home and perhaps the 'special' workshop. The families who started Family Advocacy had a different vision, one where people would not be special, but ordinary: one of the kids at pre-school, primary and high school, a friend, housemate, partner, university student, employee or business owner.

Nearly three decades later, many of these visions have become reality; however, students still travel to that special school or unit, with its special bus and special teachers. This situation is one that contradicts our Australian values of inclusiveness, fairness, and opportunity for all. It results in worse outcomes for students with disability and their peers. Yet segregation persists and sets our kids up on this separate pathway.

The submission entered by Family Advocacy highlighted structural enablers of segregation:

- persistent rejection of students with a disability by schools and principals
- default enrolment of children with disability into separate settings
- failure to systematically raise awareness of the rights of the child and parents to all interested parties, including principals and parents themselves.

Consequently, there have been increased enrolments in special schools, and a disregard of the evidence that clearly shows that outcomes improve for students with disabilities and their peers when students with disabilities are educated in the regular classroom.

View the full transcript of the inquiry or read the Family Advocacy submission on our website.



Member, Yolande Cailly, and Senior Systemic Advocate, Meg Clement-Couzner, review the submission.

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