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**Abstract**

This article contains a positive account of a Sydney girl who has Down Syndrome and the ease with which she was able to enrol in local inclusive schools with the support of her family and school staff. **Keywords: Education, School age, Inclusion**

# EMPOWERING PARENTS AND PEOPLE WITH DOWN SYNDROME IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Maie Barrow.  
Parent of Anni.

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When Anni was born we decided to bring her up as a member of the community, taking part in our everyday lives as much as possible. I had no idea what her abilities would be, no-one was either able or prepared to make any predictions. We decided to concentrate on her abilities not her disabilities.

We were fortunate that the Early Intervention Program was about to start and Anni was the first baby in the program. As we met other parents and became aware of more possibilities, we began to hope that Anni would be able to go to the local school. We felt that it would be important for her future development to participate as much as possible in the normal life around her. Putting her in a segregated environment, we felt, would make it harder for her to participate in community life later on.

While Anni was in the EIP she attended the local pre-school two days a week. When the time came to enrol her in Infants school so many of the mothers at the pre-school told me that they had put Anni's name down, I thought I should go along and see the Principal. I took Anni and as soon as I introduced myself I was handed an enrolment form. This school felt right, the Principal was supportive, the teachers and parents on side. If I had had any doubts about Anni being welcome I would not have sent her there.

The next year we went abroad and on our return Anni started at a new school. Living in the Eastern Suburbs we were fortunate in having four schools within 3km of our home. I interviewed each Principal, they all were prepared to take her, some were more welcoming than others. I chose the school nearest to our home because the Principal believed that every child should have the right to attend the local school and it was the schools responsibility to provide the best education possible for every child. Some of the teachers were apprehensive but it worked quite well in Infants school especially because we had support from the Early Intervention Program.

The change to Primary school was quite difficult since the children are expected to be much more self reliant. Anni survived the year better than I expected, helped no doubt by an understanding teacher with no special ed. training but a great deal of commitment to teaching. The next year the school went over to composite classes and streaming and the children had to find the correct classroom for each of their subjects. This worked well for Anni, the streaming meant that she was in the smaller lower level classes and the need to find her classes developed her self confidence.

Anni repeated Year 4 and now at 14 is in Year 7 at our local High School. The Principal was keen to have her in his school and the counsellor assured me it was the best place for her.

The change to High School was less traumatic than the Infants/Primary change. Anni goes to school on her own instead of with her younger sister. She has become much more mature and self reliant. She copes with the different timetable each day, packs her

bag with the correct books each night, remembers to hand over notes and pass on messages about school matters. But best of all she enjoys going to school. She prefers the practical subjects and my heart stops when she tells me of her exploits with the electric drill and sander, the iron and the sewing machine.

She reads and spells quite well but struggles with maths. Her best subject at the moment is French. Right from the word go we felt that communication was very important and Anni has had speech therapy for nearly ten years so she seems to be applying those skills to her French.

I feel Anni has progressed well in the mainstream classes. Sometimes there has been extra help and sometimes not but overall we feel the advantages of attending the local school outweigh the disadvantages.

The local school has worked well for us. Anni and her younger sister went to the same school and I was very involved with the Mothers Club, the school canteen and the P. & C. This enabled me to keep an eye on them both and to be very aware of what was happening at school. I enjoyed my involvement with the school, the children were pleased and I got to know the teachers very well.

We take it one year at a time. If the school ceases to be the best place for her, then I will find some place else. Right now I expect Anni will go through to at least Year 10 at Randwick North and after that perhaps a TAFE course.

Then ideally a job that gives her some satisfaction and a home of her own independent of us but shared with friends.

I want her to have a good life and I believe that she is well on the way to achieving it.