

family

A D V O C A C Y

Submission to Senate inquiry regarding levels of attainment and access for students with disability

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About Family Advocacy

Family Advocacy is a state and federally funded disability advocacy organisation in New South Wales (NSW), founded by families of people with disability. Our goal is to advance and protect the right of people with developmental disability to achieve meaningful lives and enjoy the same opportunities and living conditions as the majority of Australians. The organisation has a high presence and profile:

- building the capacity of families to undertake an advocacy role;
- auspicing a successful ongoing capacity building project, called Resourcing Families;
- developing leadership skills in families;
- making representations to Government regarding legislation, policy, funding, monitoring and practice and the extent to which they reflect the needs of people with developmental disability;
- and providing advocacy related information, support and advice.

Family Advocacy performs a combination of family and systemic advocacy in NSW. “Family advocacy is an independent, community-based model that usually involves family members acting on behalf of a son or daughter or sibling” (Weafer, 2003, p.39), and “systems advocacy lobbies for reform and change of social systems and structures that discriminate against, abuse and neglect people with disabilities” (Seymour and Peter, 2004, p.12). Advocacy is a cornerstone in the lives of people with disability and those that love and support them, ensuring that their rights are protected and they have natural safeguards.

Family Advocacy helps families to advocate on behalf of their child for a good life with the things most of us would expect in Australia: education in a regular classroom at a local school, a place in the community amongst friends and family, and the supports, informal and paid, necessary to make that happen.

Case study

A mum may call Family Advocacy because she is facing difficulty at her son or daughter’s school when asking the classroom teacher to make reasonable adjustments to the curriculum for her child with disability. Adjustments are needed so that he or she can continue to be included in the regular class at the local school. Family Advocacy staff would work through her concerns, provide her with information about relevant policies, including the Standards; support her to be assertive in asking for her child to be included, and to look for a mutually workable solution in dialogue with the school.

Summary of Recommendations

Family Advocacy recommends:

1. *That any future policy supports full inclusion and is committed to ending segregation of children with disability.*
2. *That schools be required to enrol all local children where families seek enrolment.*
3. *That policy makers have enforceable consciences for schools that demonstrate direct and indirect discrimination towards families seeking regular class enrolment for their child.*
4. *That policy makers recognise the effectiveness of full inclusion in producing better social and academic outcomes for students with disability, and both implement programs and provide funding accordingly.*
5. *That funding is provided for the maintenance and improvement of the programs associated with 'Every Student Every School in NSW', as initiated by the 'More Support for Students with Disability' program.*
6. *That federal funding for education must take into account the need for adequate release time and support for students with disability and their educators. This is crucial to inclusion.*
7. *That all of the inclusive education variables outlined by Family Advocacy on pages 10-11 of this submission be taken into account in any policy approach or programmatic change to the school systems in Australia.*
8. *That any policy approach to early education should ensure that early intervention supports are available in a mainstream setting such as a mainstream pre-school, to avoid starting on a segregated path.*

Introduction

Family Advocacy believes in and works for inclusive education. Inclusive education is an approach that seeks to address the learning needs of all children, youth and adults with a specific focus on those who are vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion. The principle of inclusive education was adopted at the Salamanca World Conference (UNESCO 1994) where inclusive education was viewed as a human rights issue and as a means of bringing about personal development and building relationships among individuals, groups and nations. This was stated in Article 2:

“Regular schools with an inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discrimination, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all.”

Inclusive education is not only the right thing to do; research shows it results in better academic and social outcomes for kids with disability, and positive outcomes for teachers and other students as well.


Current levels of access and attainment for students with disability in the school system, and the impact on students and families associated with inadequate levels of support

Access to education for children with disability has improved in NSW in recent decades, in large part due to the efforts of parents in the 1990s 'Kids Belong Together' campaign, and subsequent changes leading to the introduction of the *Disability Discrimination Act* Disability Standards in Education. However, the opportunity for students with disability to experience physical, social and curricular inclusion in their local school is still largely variable and in many cases still inaccessible. This is anecdotally evidenced in Family Advocacy's contact with families of school aged children, and quantitatively evidenced in recent survey research by Children with Disability Australia, which found that one in four students with a disability has been denied enrolment.

Case Study: Mac

Mac Wilson-Burns was once described as the 'most disabled child ever to be mainstreamed'. Mac is now in Grade 4, working at grade level using a combination of partner assisted foot switches, typing in Morse code, using auditory and visual scanning and his 'old faithful' yes/no foot switches. His friends regularly invent 'Mac-ifications' to include him in activities like handball, class activities and sport.

making the world more ALLsome



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You might remember me mentioning that the "Handball Machine" was the catalyst for those "[Macifications](#)" (mods to Mac's wheelchair) his classmates worked on last year?

The kids (Mac included) just decided one day Mac needed a way to play handball. Their idea was to have something mounted at the front of Mac's jogger to allow him to "play" without getting hurt.

For days, I would turn up at school with them telling me what they had tried, asking me to bring in more items to test, giving me the results on their experimentation.

Mac's mother Gina is actively involved with Family Advocacy as Mac (age 10) pursues an inclusive education in a regular setting, with his friends, despite his multiple, severe disabilities. Learn more at <https://inkyed.wordpress.com/>.

Image from Inky Ed

Discrimination continues in a much more subtle way than it once did. Education providers may not inform families of children with disabilities that they have a choice to

be enrolled in the regular class and that there are special measures to provide appropriate support. Often families will be heavily persuaded to enrol their child in a support unit or segregated school and told by multiple school professionals such as principals, teachers and school counsellor that by considering a regular class for their child would be detrimental to both their child and the other 'non-disabled' children. Research supports that it is often about principal and teacher attitudes that indicate the success of inclusive education (see Cologon 2013). This also occurs for families who are very clear about the educational pathways for their child. Family Advocacy makes contact with many families who have felt bullied by the school in pursuing an inclusive education and in many respects it continues to be an uphill battle to make this experience a positive one for all involved.

Family Advocacy frequently assists parents struggling to have their child included at school by developing the family's advocacy skills. Education issues constitute over a third of our enquiries from parents, and based on this number and the stories we hear, we conclude that parents continue to struggle to have their children with disability included on the same basis as those without disability. Further to this point we speak with many families who have been outraged to find out that their children with disability could have been attending regular class all along and that this was not presented as an option on enrolment.

Family Advocacy also notes that enrolments in schools for specific purposes in NSW have increased from 5194 students in 2010 to 5998 in 2014, according to DEC data. This indicates that educators are still encouraging parents to take the special school approach. While data on support unit enrolments is not available, in 2012 there were more than 1500 support classes in regular schools. As a parent associated with Family Advocacy has said, the presence of support units puts pressure on parents to further isolate their already vulnerable child.

An example of legislators drawing a line in the sand about the inherent right for all children to belong together can be drawn from Italy. In 1977 the Italian government legislated the abolishment of all segregated educational settings. A primary reason for this was as follows:

"In analysing the development of legislation and policy in Italy it was noted that the perpetuation of parallel education systems reinforced rather than reduced segregated education, leaving a situation where schools could evade enrolment and participation of children who experience disability if they did not want to include them, as there remained another place for children to be sent". D'alessio (2011)

In looking at the current system in NSW there remains strong 'parallel education systems' which would explain the increased enrolments in recent years in segregated schools and support units. This also explains the culture within the education system to move children with disability into segregated settings.

Recommendations:

- 1. That any future policy supports full inclusion and commits to ending segregation of children with disability.*
- 2. That schools be required to enrol all local children where families seek enrolment.*
- 3. That policy makers have enforceable consciences for schools that demonstrating direct and indirect discrimination towards families seeking regular class enrolment for their child.*

The social, economic and personal benefits of improving outcomes for students with disability at school and in further education and employment

Kids belong together in mainstream schools, with appropriate resources, support and adjustment. Research shows that this provides the best learning outcomes for children with disability (de Graaf, van Hove and Haveman 2013), as well as benefitting children without disability (e.g. Dessemontet and Bless 2013). Children who are taught with diverse peer groups benefit in a variety of ways and have no negative impact on their overall results. As evidence suggests, those included in mainstream education are more likely to gain social and economic participation in the general community due to exposure to a diverse curriculum, employing key social skills/cues, enhancing communication skills, building support networks/friendships along the way in inclusive settings.

Family Advocacy has produced a video about inclusion called 'Jacob's Story' (screen shots below), which shows inclusion in a public high school and gives views from different members of the school community, including the school Principal and teachers. Family Advocacy encourages the use of the video, which is listed in selected references at the end of this paper.



Figure 1 Screenshot from Jacob's Story



Figure 2 Screenshot from Jacob's Story

Recommendation:

4. That policy makers recognise the effectiveness of full inclusion in producing better social and academic outcomes for students with disability, and both implement programs and provide funding accordingly.

The impact on policies and the education practice of individual education sectors as a result of the More Support for Students with Disabilities program, and the impact of the cessation of this program in 2014 on schools and students;

As the Committee is no doubt aware, More Support for Students with Disability was implemented in NSW as 'Every Student Every School'. Family Advocacy supported this policy and many of the programs that arose from it. These included functional (rather than diagnosis or IQ) assessments of students' support needs; development of excellent online learning modules about the Disability Standards in Education and funding to support teachers to undertake this; other professional development on accommodating different learners; and a devolution of specialist disability support from special schools to regular schools.

Most of these programs were in line with positions Family Advocacy had been advocating for some time. The functional assessment, for example, means that a child does not have to be saddled with an IQ test which can lower expectations of educators and damage self-esteem. Instead, teachers can now assess support on a needs basis for any child.

While many of these projects were completed in the funding period allocated for 'More Support for Students with Disability', Family Advocacy is concerned that, more than ever during the roll out of the NDIS, students with disability and their educators need support. If effective, we hope that the NDIS will increase the numbers of children with disability accessing their local school. Therefore, the programs associated with 'Every Student Every School' will need maintenance and continuous improvement.

Recommendations:

5. *That funding is provided for the maintenance and improvement of the programs associated with 'Every Student Every School' in NSW, as initiated by the 'More Support for Students with Disability' program.*
6. *That federal funding for education must take into account the need for adequate release time and support for students with disability and their educators. This is crucial to inclusion.*

What should be done to better support students with disability in our schools

Family Advocacy outlines below the key variables that determine the inclusivity of a school:

A welcoming attitude

Relationships with educators are an important part of any child's life, and while many parents may take this for granted, families of people with disability are often conscious of the vulnerability of their child. They will thus be aware of the even greater importance of a positive relationship with teachers. If a negative relationship develops, parents will often simply face attempting to find a more inclusive school. For this reason, amongst others, Family Advocacy would always suggest a problem-solving approach to school issues. However, this means there is an even greater imperative for policy makers to ensure teachers and schools have the education, culture and resources to practice inclusion.

In an inclusive school, all children and young people from the local community are welcomed to participate in the full curricular and co-curricular life of the school. Everyone who is engaged with students – teachers, school leaders, parents – have high expectations for all learners. The school's welcoming attitude is underpinned by a system that believes all children and young people belong and should be welcomed and educated in the regular class of their local neighbourhood school. The system recognises and promotes the benefits of inclusion to schools, school boards, parents and the general community.

Policies

In an inclusive school, whole school policies create a culture that welcomes all students and celebrates diversity. All students feel culturally safe and are valued members of the school community. School policies are underpinned by systemic policies that promote and assist schools to achieve full school participation, cultural safety and celebrate diversity.

Attitude to parents

In an inclusive school, parents are partners in their child's learning and the school facilitates and invites parental participation through regular meetings to plan and monitor their child's participation and progress at school. The system demonstrates the critical value of parental involvement in all material.

Classroom teachers

In an inclusive school, classroom teachers have core competencies to teach mixed ability classes. The core competencies are achieved through teacher training that adequately prepares teachers for the mixed ability classes they will teach and ongoing professional development opportunities to build greater competence. This should occur both at the university level, during the teaching degree and through ongoing professional development. Classroom teachers are supported by trained staff with the expertise to plan and adjust curriculum and teaching strategies. The system ensures the availability of such staff in a timely fashion.

Moreover, in an inclusive school, classroom teachers draw on curricula frameworks that address the learning needs of all students. Systemically, State and National Curriculum Bodies develop inclusive curricula and material to support their implementation. Locally, classroom teachers have resources at their disposal to facilitate inclusive practice. The system provides training and materials to assist schools to welcome and educate all students.

Principals

In an inclusive school, principals are school leaders who promote and support inclusion. They are trained and supported systemically in this endeavor.

Assessment

In an inclusive school, functional, non categorical assessments identify strengths and areas for attention in students. The system analyses student need to arrive at both funding and appropriate approaches to enable students to learn.

Curricula

In an inclusive school, the teacher and school use inclusive curricula that enable students to meet their real learning goals in the context of the regular curriculum. This is underpinned by State and National curricular frameworks that address the learning needs of all students.

Funding

In an inclusive school, the budget is distributed equitably and targeted towards meeting the student's additional learning needs. The system allocates funding equitably in ways that promote inclusion.

Support

In an inclusive school, support for students is provided in seamless ways that promote participation and inclusion and strengthen natural support. The system guides schools in their use of support resources.

Built environment

In an inclusive school, the built environment enables students with challenges in mobility to remain with their cohort. Simultaneously, the system removes barriers in the built environment.

Participation

In an inclusive school, children with disability are not removed from regular class or segregated in alternative settings to other students.

Recommendation:

- 7. That all of the above variables be taken into account in any policy approach or programmatic change to the school systems in Australia.*

The early education of children with disability

For children with disability, exclusion and low expectations often begin early. If a child's disability is identified early in their life, parents may have been subject to many specialists, diagnoses, and designations of what to expect (or what not to expect) from their child. While medical treatment and early intervention can be profoundly valuable, this should not mean that both children and parents are denied the ordinary life stages and interactions any child in Australia might usually expect. Therefore, early intervention supports should be offered in regular settings to the greatest extent possible. Currently in many settings children with disability are isolated from their peers with the intention of providing specialised early intervention programs.

Recommendation:

8. *That any policy approach to early education should ensure that early intervention supports are available in a mainstream setting such as a mainstream pre-school, to avoid starting on a segregated path.*

Selected References

Cologon, Kathy 2013 *Inclusion in Education: Toward a Better Outcome for Students with Disability, Children with Disability Australia*, available from <http://www.cda.org.au/inclusion-in-education>.

Cologon, Kathy 2013 *Recognising our Shared Humanity: Human Rights and Inclusive Education in Italy and Australian*, *Italian Journal of Disability Studies-Settembre 2013-ol. 1, N. 1*.

D'Alessio, S. (2011). Inclusive education in Italy: A critical analysis of the policy of integrazione scolastica. Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

de Graaf, G., Van Hove, G., & Haveman, M. 2013, More academics in regular schools? The effect of regular versus special school placement on academic skills in Dutch primary school students with Down syndrome. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 57 (1), 21–38.

Dessemontet, R. S., & Bless, G. 2013, The impact of including children with intellectual disability in general education classrooms on the academic achievement of their low-, average-, and high-achieving peers. *Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability*, 38(1), 23–30.

Family Advocacy web links:

- 'Jacob's Story' film available at: <https://vimeo.com/94623965>
- 'Let's Get Started' workshop on starting school at: <https://vimeo.com/album/3284835>
- Weafer J. 2003, *Jigsaw of Advocacy: A Research Report*, Woods M. (Ed), Comhairle, Dublin.

Seymour S. and Peter D. 2004, 'Disability Advocacy in Australia' in Goodbody Economic Consultants, *Developing an Advocacy Service for People with Disabilities: International Research Papers*, Vol 2, Feb 2004, Dublin.