

Member Consultation on Positive Education Experiences

CDA Issues Paper

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Contact: Stephanie Gotlib, Executive Officer
Suite 3, 173 Queens Parade, Clifton Hill, VIC 3068
Phone (03) 9482 1130 or 0425 724 230
stephanieg@cda.org.au
www.cda.org.au

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Participation and Consultation – Key Themes	3
The Importance of School Education	3
Additional Support	3
Impact of the Disability Standards for Education	4
Elements Contributing to a Positive Education Experience	5
School Choice	5
Relationships with School Personnel	7
Negotiating Accommodations	8
Consultation and Communication	10
Ideas and Expectations about Inclusion	11
Using Outside Consultants	13
Conclusion	14
References	17
APPENDIX A – Education – Your Experience: Contributions Sought	18

INTRODUCTION

Children with Disability Australia (CDA) called for member experiences on positive education experiences and received responses from families of children with disability and organisations (Appendix A). CDA's intention was to utilise information from the experiences of members in education to highlight the key success factors as well as areas of concern in the provision of education to students with disability.

A total of 31 responses were received that varied significantly in length and content. Most were written responses, however a small number of members responded by phone. Only 30% of the responses detailed positive education experiences. The majority of responses provided were characterised by conflict, misunderstandings and significant differences of opinions experienced over many years. These responses detailed situations where there was disagreement regarding the needs of the student and issues regarding poor resourcing of education support. In some cases students changed schools multiple times in order to find a school and a principal that was accepting of students with disability and had inclusive practices.

CDA received some strong responses highlighting the ongoing frustration many students and parents have because of the constant negotiation and advocacy required in relation to education. Over the entire school career of a student with disability it is typical that families are required to vigilantly monitor their child's education program in order to ensure reasonable adjustments are in place. These discussions and negotiations are highly stressful, particularly when schools do not have a commitment or the capacity to deliver these appropriately.

This report presents the key themes raised in the feedback provided by CDA members. Respondents more often referred to the elements of consultation and participation implicitly rather than directly, and the experiences provided were not provided as 'stories' or 'case studies.' This paper has therefore been prepared as a report on the consultation rather than an analysis of particular case studies.

A number of members openly questioned the focus on positive experiences in this project, when the prevailing knowledge and evidence is that experiences are poor, discrimination is common and the need for wide ranging reform has been recognised by governments.

One response in particular was telling in that the parent could not detail anything positive and in follow up from CDA, questioned whether this consultation was being deliberately naive in avoiding the realities faced by parents;

I cannot fill this out focussing on positive things. My child being unable to attend school full time for four years broke my family, sent me broke and isolated us from society entirely. I hate the education system with a passion.

There was a significant variance in the type of responses received by members. Some were extremely brief and contained single comments or reflections, while others

provided significant detail regarding their own or their child's experience. One such response provided a diary of events over 2 years which had been used in a discrimination action against their school. A number provided instances of things that had worked well at school, while others reflected on their negative experiences to think about what would have worked better for them. These are included in the sections below.

There was a major focus in the responses on the experiences of students and families to achieve a level of recognition and support at school. There was little reference made to outcomes, which may suggest that their focus remains more on achieving basic acceptance and recognition of the needs of their children with schools than looking too far ahead. While some respondents explained their desire for a good education for their children and described the lengths they were prepared to go to ensure that it was delivered, there was much more focus on the process of negotiating educational supports and adjustments rather than educational outcomes achieved.

It was clear from many of the responses that over the whole timeframe of a school life it is reductive to categorise educational experiences as simply all positive or all negative. For all parents and students, education is a process, and parents of students with disability are required to spend more time negotiating with schools about adjustments and educational programs than parents of other students.

This ongoing process of rolling negotiation can be highly frustrating, and parents overwhelmingly report that planning and monitoring education programs for their children needs to be easier and less conflict driven. What would change this for many parents is a higher level of understanding and commitment to inclusion by school leaders, more resources and improved skills across the teaching workforce.

CDA members often report that they will move schools to leave behind a negative experience for the student and the parent in search of a better one. These negative experiences have been well articulated in other CDA reports and submissions, and include bullying, isolation, discrimination and a lack of learning. Members found that they could better identify the suite of factors that provide a positive school experience after changing schools where their previous experience had been poor. Most students' school careers begin with optimism and it is not until they experience harassment, indifference or discrimination that they realise that their school experience is likely to be different to that of other students.

Key points raised in contributions to this consultation are:

- Successful inclusion starts with a positive attitude from school leadership
- Trained teachers and school leaders are essential to positive experiences
- Vigilance and strong advocacy is required from parents to negotiate and ensure the needs of students were recognised and addressed

- Parents expect schools and education systems should be better equipped to educate students with disability
- Parents bring an intimate knowledge of their children which needs to be considered and utilised when establishing education programs and ensuring accommodations required are most appropriate and effective

PARTICIPATION AND CONSULTATION - KEY THEMES

The Importance of School Education

Respondents placed a high value on their child's education and many had gone to great lengths to enable good outcomes;

I don't want my son marginalised in school. His education is particularly important to me. In fact I want his education to continue after he finishes year 12 next year but I don't know how that can happen for someone with an intellectual disability apart from joining a segregated setting, which I don't want.

I strongly recommend to all parents not to accept mediocrity and complacency toward your child and their right to an education, an inclusive education where your child will be shown respect and given opportunity to reach his/her full potential, which is the right of every child.

The responses submitted to this consultation confirmed again what CDA regularly hears from members. Education for students with disability is highly valued by parents and many are exasperated by the degree to which they feel they have to fight and advocate to get the most basic of accommodations;

I used to think that if a child was having difficulty at school a caring parent would know pretty much straight away what the problem was and how to fix it. I couldn't have been more wrong. My expectations that my son would follow the same educational path as any neurotypical student simply didn't fit.

Additional Support

The funding and delivery of additional targeted support is a key area of concern for respondents. Many of the responses in this area echo the general concern expressed by the wider CDA membership. A theme from respondents was that parents need to be constantly vigilant in ensuring that the support their child needs is delivered. Responses about how this was initiated and delivered by the school without significant parent advocacy were far outnumbered by ones that detailed stories of difficult negotiations that sometimes crossed school terms and years;

It doesn't matter how good the teachers are or how committed the principal of the school is if they themselves are not supported by the government. Appropriate allocation of funds is the key issue.

Another parent commented on difficulties their son was having getting his support delivered at school;

This year (year 11) they have been shutting him out of classes with an aide. His aides have also refused to do personal care since the beginning of the year even though it is pretty straightforward. My husband was going to the school to take him to the toilet for a while. The principal has promised to get aides to do personal care but never does.

Another parent responded to the call for positive experiences with;

I'm sorry I can't possibly fill this out focusing on positive things, my child being unable attend school full time for four years... I hate the education system with a passion.

Impact of the Disability Standards for Education

The Disability Standards for Education (DSE) was not mentioned by name by any respondents. Instances of perceived discrimination were raised, but they did not refer specifically to the DSE. This is consistent with the finding of the review of the DSE that there needs to be greater awareness of the Standards in schools and amongst parents.¹

A number of respondents described how they worked hard at the relationships with their school, as they saw this as directly related to the quality of provision to their child, and did not enter these relationships with the expectation that they would need to take formal discrimination action in order to get their child access to a good education.

In a report to the United Nations about Australia's performance of meeting our obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities², the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) noted that the DSE had not had the effect of standards in other areas, and that attitudes to students with disabilities were still a barrier:

The level of discrimination complaints in the area of education (average 9% per annum) indicates that the Education Standards have not had a beneficial effect similar to that of the Transport Standards. The Commission considers that this could be due in part to the infrastructural changes required for access to transport compared with the attitudinal changes required for access to education.³

¹ See: Disability Discrimination Act 2008, *Education Standards*, viewed 9/4/14, http://www.daeustandards.info/education_stds.php, Australian Government Department of Education 2013, *Disability Standards for Education*, Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra, viewed 9/4/14, <http://education.gov.au/disability-standards-education>.

² United Nations Enable 2006; *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, United Nations, Geneva, viewed 9/4/14, <http://www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?navid=12&pid=150>

³ Australian Human Rights Commission 2013, *Information Concerning Australia and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, Submission to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Sydney, p. 8.

Elements Contributing to a Positive Education Experience

The AHRC's observation cited above about the impact of attitudes to disability in education has been borne out by the contributions to this consultation. Many responses cited the key ingredients to a good education experience as related to attitudes and human qualities of the school staff as much as technical educational know-how. A number of the responses mentioned key elements that were missing from their own experience that would have made a real and positive difference

These elements generally described are:

- Genuine care and respect being shown by the school to the student and families
- A commitment to the right of every child to a quality education
- Regular open communication
- Collation of detailed information about the student to inform planning and provision
- Trained teachers who are flexible and caring in their approach, and who genuinely believe in the capacity of every child to learn
- A number of respondents highlighted the importance of children attending the local school and being part of their local community and having peer relationships
- Access to external expertise and safeguards to ensure that individual programs are optimal and to add accountability for school performance
- Schools having respect for the knowledge parents have about their children and being responsive to advice and requests about particular approaches that parents know will work
- Schools being respectful of students with disability and taking their feedback seriously about what may or may not work for them. This is particularly relevant in instances of bullying from other students or teachers, the way assistance is provided (or not) or other experiences

School Choice

Many respondents had experiences in more than one school and in some cases found a better experience. School choice is driven by a range of individual factors and there is little guidance available. In a number of responses, parents described how they were made to feel unwelcome very early on in their child's enrolment;

I think that the key to finding a good school is to look for positive and inclusive attitudes of the staff. If the staff are positive, respectful and understanding of the students and want to make it work, then in most cases it will. (Due to my son's learning and speech/language difficulties and his need for extra support) we chose a small non-government school with a learning support unit. This has made a huge difference as he is able to get the required support he needs. Many of the government schools in the area are overcrowded and underfunded. As his mother and his advocate, I chose this school as the lower student numbers make it less chaotic for him and he is able to form friendships easily.

Another response talked about changing schools and moving between mainstream and segregated settings in order to find a school that could provide a good education and which understood the needs of their son;

After having been at a really good primary school that included 'Brett' in everything, and had good aides in the classrooms, we had to confront secondary school. Our local secondary college was reluctant to have Brett there and said that a student with level 4 funding shouldn't be in mainstream school. We were also advised by Brett's psychologist to go to down the special school route because of the threat of bullying in a mainstream school.

We enrolled him in a 7-12 special school and it was not as we were led to believe. There was no real learning challenge for Brett as the curriculum was being taught at a really low level and even when we asked for an individualised program we were told that it was important that Brett work with the class group. The bullying at the school was fierce, and Brett copped it all year because of his weight. The teachers were OK but the support staff, including the bus drivers were often impatient and undid the work done by the teachers. Friendships were hard to sustain and eventually Brett began to refuse to go to school. After it became clear that the special school was not working, we looked to go back into mainstream.

We found a school that was open and had experience with students with disability and had a dedicated deputy principal whose role took in managing the programs of students with disability.

This new school was fantastic and very responsive. The fact that they had a senior person in charge meant that they took students with disability seriously and didn't just give the coordination role to a junior teacher or someone with gaps in their teaching load. She had a big influence on how the school went about things and she had high standards of teachers in how they worked with students she was coordinating.

She mentored teachers that needed it, communicated to parents regularly and made time to talk to the students with disability regularly so she knew what was going on. Where the school couldn't provide a particular program, she would organise something outside the school. In our son's case this was a social skills group at the local community centre that was paid for by the school. We were lucky finding this school but it is sad that government schools in the same area can be allowed to be so different in how they treat students with disabilities.

Parents regularly provide feedback that they need good information about what schools should offer in regard to students with disability and that this information is difficult to obtain. The DSE have a low profile in this feedback from members, as they are looking for practical information about what schools provide. Many parents do not like the idea of having to resort to threatening or actually taking formal action to achieve a good accommodation at school for their children. One respondent suggested that external guidance in the inclusion process would be useful;

We really need inclusion support coordinators that will go into schools to explain how to include children socially and academically and ensure it happens. The

inclusion support that is happening for early childhood sounds fantastic and we need it for schools too.

Relationships with School Personnel

A number of responses talked about the importance of relationships with key teachers and school leaders. Many of the stories described in detail how the school experience for both them and their children broke down after a communication or relationship breakdown with a key individual at the school. In some cases the deterioration in the school experience was directly attributed to the actions of a teacher or principal.

This confirms the research evidence as well as anecdotal evidence from across the CDA membership that the attitudes towards disability and a belief in inclusive education can define the school experience for students with disability as well as their parents. Indeed the purposeful social interactions and engagement initiated by teachers has been highlighted as a success factor in inclusive early education⁴.

Without changes to the prevailing views and behaviours of adults towards inclusion, it is unlikely that children with disability can overcome the isolation and prejudice that characterises the current experience of living with disability⁵.

One parent said that it was the school's attitude that was the main ingredient of the positive school experience, from which everything else flowed;

As a parent of a teenage daughter with a disability I have found finding the right school for her has made a huge difference in her happiness and overall development. The positive and inclusive atmosphere of her new school has been a beacon of hope for a brighter future for our daughter and a great relief for us as parents. To see her blossom into a confident young woman who is being supported and encouraged to be involved in all areas of school life and community is such a relief after years of seemingly endless struggles for her to be given the same rights as other children.

The example above is representative of feedback from members that if a school has a comprehensive understanding of inclusion and implements school-wide practices, then it generally follows that the school experience for students and parents is generally positive. This includes negotiations between the parents, students and the school being conducted openly and professionally.

Unfortunately examples of schools with this type of inclusive approach are relatively rare, and the more common reports are about schools needing to be pushed by parents to deliver educational programs and adjustments that are needed by essential for students with disability.

⁴ Rebekah Grace et al. 2008, 'Far From Ideal: Everyday Experiences of Mothers and Early Childhood Professionals Negotiating an Inclusive Early Childhood Experience in the Australian Context,' *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, Vol. 28, No. 1, p. 18.

⁵ Kathy Cologon 2013, *Inclusion in Education – Towards Equality for Students with Disability*, Children with Disability Australia, Clifton Hill, p. 8.

Many parents report that they feel that they are trying to educate their school about inclusion and create a positive awareness about students with disability as well as negotiating adjustments for their own child. It is common for students to change schools in search of one that has the basic understanding of inclusion and values diversity. A high number of responses included references to students with disability having to attend a number of different schools for this reason.

CDA is aware of numbers of students with disability being home schooled or enrolled in distance education because of major difficulties with schools. These are a result of students being refused adjustments, repeated suspensions and eventual expulsion, schools not accepting the student full time, or student and parent exhaustion with fighting schools for reasonable adjustments.

As of 2013 I am home schooling my gifted son with a learning disability. Why? We tried four schools in four years- two state primary schools, one independent and one Catholic primary school. Right across the board the schools were unable to cope with the variety of needs my son required. One significant issue that caused me to give up on the school system was a request by his psychologist and myself to the school that he be allowed to be on his own at break times on his computer playing games. This was denied and he was made to sit in the play area. He was self harming from the anxiety of these playground times. In three months of being told he had to be in the play area with his computer he had his lunch stood on, spat on, his hat put in the toilet and his computer wrecked. This was a Catholic primary school who pride themselves on a no-bullying policy.

Negotiating Accommodations

Many responses indicated that a range of elements needed to be factored into negotiations. Respondents talked about the need for schools to take a detailed approach – that as well as the obvious requirements, small things are also important, and if ignored the impacts could be significant. A number of responses echoed other feedback received by CDA that the negotiation load for parents of students with disability with schools is significant. Implicit in the responses was that parents expected schools and education systems to be able to do better in educating and accommodating their children in schooling, without the need for constant advocacy. Where the educational experience was good, key factors included the competence of the school in initiating education planning and following through on delivery of these plans. Parents said they didn't feel their role should be to motivate, drive and educate schools about inclusion and making adjustments that this should be part of what schools are there to do.

While recognising awareness of disability in schools is important, respondents were clear that on its own, it is not enough to guarantee a good educational experience for students with disability. In their view schools must have the right motivation, skills and capacities to meet the social, educational and developmental needs of their child. As well as having well trained teaching staff, a commitment to processes such as individual

planning and education delivery, as well as a partnership approach with parents and students.

Overall though, the willingness of schools to genuinely engage with parents and students and actually deliver the necessary adjustments is a fundamental precondition for a positive experience. One respondent described how her son's school went about including him at school, and the degree of inclusion is evident in the description of the school as 'our school';

My son is in year 2 at our local primary school and receives support funding. He has cerebral palsy, epilepsy and is nonverbal. He is unable to assist with transfers. On the whole there is so much that our school does really well. They never complain about budgets. They have a variety of aides throughout the day and week which is tricky for consistency but ensures that I never get the call that they don't have cover for my son. They've worked through building adaptations in a timely way and have sought out alternative curriculum when he struggled to keep up with his peers (hard when you're non verbal and still learning your alternative communication device). They organised epilepsy training when he was formally diagnosed. They have constantly hired high quality aides with a similar child rearing ethos to our local community.

This parent then reflected on the future and the challenges ahead, noting that there is no certainty about his education;

As my son grows our challenges will be his physical difficulties and transfers. He probably needs more one on one tutoring time using special methods and I don't know if the public school system has the budget or creativity to provide this level of support. My son gives every indication of being clever, but [his education is challenging] because of his multiple disabilities. Hopefully the school system will continue to support him.

This example demonstrates that the provision of adjustments for students is dynamic and not a 'set and forget' activity. Schools need to commit to ongoing negotiation and revision of school programs and adjustments over time in consultation with parents.

One respondent made the point that it is as much the responsibility of the government as the school to ensure a positive education experience, and where the support funding is not there it is often hard for a school to provide the required accommodations and adjustments;

We can start with the positives. The parents, the staff and the teachers all [have] positive points to applaud. However it doesn't matter how good the teachers are or how committed the principal of the school is, if they are not supported by the government. Appropriate allocation of funds is the key issue.

My daughter is seven and for her school to manage her she requires a one-to-one aide. For her prep year she was only able to attend a maximum of 10 hours per week

as no more funding would be allocated. For grade one, we want more access to the curriculum.

Our daughter does pose challenges for a school but if properly resourced they could easily accommodate her needs as [the school] has the heart and the skills to do so... the education standards all sound too good to be true and indeed they are. Shame on the government for how you treat those who most need education.

Consultation and Communication

Respondents frequently referred to consultation with schools as being problematic. While it is a requirement of the DSE that schools consult students and families about the adjustments they may need, it was frequently raised that it was the parents having to initiate the consultation in order to progress the obtaining of necessary supports and adjustments.

Consultation needs to be open and ongoing, as the process of inclusion and provision of support to a developing student is not static.

Implicit in many of the stories and contributions was that inclusion and creating a positive experience at school is not a static event. A number of contributors submitted longitudinal accounts of theirs and their child's school experiences. A child's school career is not linear, and involves multiple teachers, administrators and for many students, multiple schools. Indeed, education inclusion has been described as a process, and as such a systemic approach to inclusion is needed rather than just an individual focus on the student with disability.⁶

For every student and students with disability in particular, inclusion is a process that is implicit in the school experience not something bolted on or 'done' to respond to the DSE;

My son's education always feels precarious in that we have to constantly negotiate and monitor his program to make sure that the opportunities that are there for the other kids. Other parents don't have to attend the number of meetings we do just to make the basic things happen. All it needs to send things off the rails is a bad experience with a teacher or a change in staff from one term or year to the next. It takes a lot of effort to get things to work for 'Dylan' and if there is a major upset with one teacher it feels like we have to start over again.

One respondent highlighted the need for certainty in communication and consultation;

My daughter has two teachers and three teacher aides. It's difficult to work out who to talk to and I have asked the school for a 'go to' person. There doesn't seem to be clear guidelines on this which makes things even more difficult. As a parent it is difficult to strike the right balance between advocating for our children and not

⁶ Kathy Cologon 2013, *Inclusion in Education – Towards Equality for Students with Disability*, Children with Disability Australia, Clifton Hill, p. 14.

upsetting people. I think I would need a degree in negotiation skills to navigate the school system effectively. This is an area that needs particular attention so that the idea of teachers and parents being partners becomes a reality.

Other respondents refer to the need for schools to take the knowledge and requests from parents seriously and respond to issues as they arise, both small and large. They also expect schools to initiate actions that would benefit students;

The school made an individual learning plan for 'Bruce' which meant we could stipulate appropriate expectations. The school psychologist was able to determine that Bruce was having trouble in some areas and recommended he see a paediatrician, which was good because we ended up getting a diagnosis. This may have never happened if the school/classroom teacher were not proactive.

Ideas and Expectations about Inclusion

There were a range of general and specific views about inclusion from respondents. The basic premise many parents start with is that the education system is capable and competent at providing education, and that schools should be able to accommodate the needs of their child. Most parents recognise that this will take some negotiation and in some cases some additional resources. The difficulties that many parents encounter illustrate a very different reality. Schools exist in our community and largely reflect community values. The fact that disability is still stigmatised and discriminated against in the community means that these attitudes also exist within schools.

Parents do bring a particular knowledge about their children that should be utilised by schools, but they are not professional educators. Schools need to work positively with parents in partnership to design and deliver high quality programs.

Feedback provided to CDA through this consultation and elsewhere is clear about good practice being characterised by a school's inherent commitment to inclusion and by good communication;

What does inclusion mean (to me)? This is an important but difficult issue. Unless people have had contact with children with a disability they don't really think about this issue. Therefore some people think that the simple presence of a child with a disability is enough. The fact is that inclusion is far more than this and teachers need to get their head around this.

Respondents wanted access to the mainstream education system at the most practical level; others had a higher vision for what they wanted not only for their children, but for the education system itself;

Shall we drop the term 'special needs? The term implies that something special is needed, a teacher with special skills, a therapist and so on. I don't want anything 'special' for either of my daughters, ordinary is just fine. It's important for schools to

realise that... it's not a question of children needing something 'special' but all children having unique needs.

One parent described that he resorted to setting up a new school because he did not see his child's need being met by either the mainstream or special school system;

I think the important thing is one size does not fit all. Inclusion in mainstream schooling can work very well for the right student when properly resourced and appropriate modifications and adjustments made by the mainstream, not just by the person with the disability. No one wants to go back to a situation where people with disabilities were hidden away and viewed as curiosities on rare occasions, and we have seen many examples of programs for people with disabilities where everyone is thrown in together, no matter what their issues, and this just doesn't work either. Our students engage with their community from a position of strength, having become confident, polite young men and coming from their own network of peers, and I think that that is inclusion.

One fairly consistent theme of responses was the ongoing effort needed by parents to make school useful and enjoyable for their children, and the expectation that schools and the general education system should be better at inclusion than parents found. A number of respondents highlighted that vigilance is required across years of schooling, and the risks of breakdown of relationship or school commitment remains high throughout.

Changing personnel is a fact of life in schools, and parents are generally realistic about the need to interact with number of school staff over time. However, often their experience is that there is a general low level of awareness of inclusive education and some parents feel they constantly have to orientate and educate school staff about the process of inclusion as well as the specifics of their child. CDA does not perceive a high level of system-wide confidence about the underlying capacity for inclusion in education systems. Reports that indicate that the success for their child at school is still personality dependant are common. Major worries for parents and students alike include the risk of changing personnel or poor implementation of plans;

It shouldn't be as hard as it is for kids with a disability to just go to the local school and get a fair go, especially when they have extra funding. We spent a lot of time in endless meetings and while sometimes they resulted in action and we had some productive times, but ultimately it came too little. We had to deal with at least 3 different people at the college and they all had their own ideas. What they needed to do was to listen to us and our son and keep an open mind.

Some years were good, but it all changed in year 10. One teacher thought she knew better than the plan, and tried to take my son on in all the wrong ways. By the time we found out that there had been fights with the teacher the situation was almost irretrievable. Our son hadn't told us because he thought we might have blamed him, so he was really stressed. The worst part was that is this happened in a subject that he really liked, so the experience soured his whole school experience.

You hear that the teacher makes all the difference to whether a kid likes the subject, but this teacher spoilt the whole school experience.

Things have always been on the edge with school, but this made him not want to go back. We didn't get a lot of help from the school either in trying to resolve things.

Using Outside Consultants

A number of participants referred to using outside consultants to assist in the design and implementation of the program for students. Where this was done successfully it made a perceptible difference to the educational experience for students.

The development of expert resources for teachers and schools in specific areas has been recognised as an important component of supporting inclusion and initiatives to establish resource units to provide secondary and tertiary consultancy for teachers and schools have been included in a number of the More Support for Students with Disabilities initiative⁷

One respondent spoke about a consultant who was a specialist education consultant from a diagnosis specific organisation that came to the school and was able to provide specific learning strategies for the student and recommend a series of adjustments that the school implemented successfully. In describing the role of the consultant the respondent described the impact that they had on the school, as well as on their own confidence in dealing with the school;

They came in and liaised with the school about 'John's' learning needs, which was no small thing as the school previously hadn't wanted to acknowledge his differences because he didn't qualify for the Severe Disability Register. He did have real difficulties in mainstream classrooms, and the school didn't know what to do about it.

In meetings with the school she had lots of knowledge at her fingertips, which the school staff didn't. It was really though her involvement and support that I could get the school to make any modifications for John's learning. We negotiated modifications to the timetable, homework, lunchbreaks and assemblies.

That came at a time that I really lacked confidence in my role as a parent advocate, so if things had been left to me I doubt the outcome would have been as positive as it was.

A number of the responses were about the battles that parents had negotiating with schools and very few referred to the use of external consultants. The response above

⁷ Australian Government Department of Education, 'Evaluation of the More Support for Students with Disabilities,' Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra, viewed 7/4/14, <https://education.gov.au/evaluation-more-support-students-disabilities-initiative>

The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development also used a diagnostic secondary consultancy model for students with disability as part of its MSSD partnership. See: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, *More Support for Students with Disabilities*, State of Victoria, Melbourne, viewed 9/4/14, <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/needs/pages/mssd.aspx>

talked about a consultant who was a diagnostic specialist, another respondent talked about the need for personal support and advocacy for meetings with school;

Parents can benefit from preparation time and coaching re communication skills with a support person or advocate prior to SSG meetings. Parents can also benefit from having an advocate at a meeting but some are worried about how this may be perceived and some schools appear to respond defensively.

This comment echoes the experiences of many parents who experience negative responses from schools when they request to have an advocate present at meetings, particularly if the advocate is a funded disability advocate rather than a friend or other professional.

CDA members often report that advocacy is an important ingredient to achieving the appropriate adjustments at school, although in some states the availability of skilled advocates is poor.

Access to this kind of specialised assistance is vital and is judging from feedback from members is in short supply. Parents want to be able to have support in negotiations with schools. One respondent highlighted the importance utilising external resources in the context of safeguarding and monitoring school practices, particularly in special schools;

I would like to flag the importance of positive behaviour support approaches in special schools to appropriately support children with complex needs and the value in some kind of external monitoring as occurs in disability services with the Office of the Senior Practitioner⁸.

CONCLUSION

The issues raised in this consultation are consistent with those that have been identified in other pieces of work by CDA, however some important themes emerged. The scope of this consultation was limited; however it elicited valuable insights that are important to the development of the current education reforms. There is a need to more fully explore ways that the voices of parents and students with disability can be routinely included in this policy work.

While a wide variety of issues were raised in this consultation – some positive some negative, the overriding theme was that parents expect a greater systemic capacity for inclusion and a clearer pathway for negotiating adjustments and accommodations at the school level.

The responsibility for activating a system to develop education plans belongs rightly with the education system and not with parents, and they are frustrated and exasperated that getting basic recognition, adjustment and access to learning takes so much time and

⁸ See: Victorian Department of Human Services 2011, *Office of the Senior Practitioner*, State of Victoria, Melbourne, viewed 9/4/14, <http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/for-individuals/your-rights/offices-protecting-rights/office-of-the-senior-practitioner>

negotiation. The responses showed that providing a constructive and effective education response to a student with disability can really only happen if there is a commitment to inclusion built into the school culture, or if there is a particular ‘champion’ staff person or teacher who takes carriage of this in a school. If there is resistance to having a student with disability in the school, or if the relationship breaks down with the parents, then the probability of a successful and positive education experience are severely hampered.

Schools are required to bring their skills and capacities as professional educators to contextualise the goals of the parents and students and design and deliver meaningful and inclusive programs.

From the contributions received in this consultation it is clear that parents often find themselves as the drivers of consultation, planning and participation for their children with schools, sometimes resulting in highly contested negotiations. Parents don’t like to have to be combative and have frequent disagreements and arguments with their schools but this was a consistent experience reported.

The DSE did not rate highly as something parents consider as part of their school experience. Some respondents did make reference to them in the context of making formal complaints, but to others they are not visible. Inclusion is not yet central to the provision of education in Australia, and this was again borne out in the responses to this consultation. This may be a consequence of the expectation of inclusion being driven from an anti-discrimination framework rather than an education framework. The fact that practice differs so widely from school to school is a major concern, particularly since the DSE have been around for almost 9 years.

This consultation has shown again that the DSE are necessary, but not sufficient to deliver inclusive practice in schools. Parents want a genuine commitment and capacity to educate their children, and this includes confidence that schools are properly motivated to comply with the DSE.

Improving information about the fundamental requirements of schools to deliver inclusive education (not just relying on the DSE) is important in regard to assisting parents in making choices and being informed by expert educators and is fundamental to positive education experiences for students with disability.

The responses also confirmed that the degree to which schools are flexible and inclusive is patchy and still dependent on the personal commitment of principals. Parents should not have to ‘shop around’ for schools based on whether they ‘get’ disability and inclusion; this should be a given and a basic requirement of receiving public funding. The DSE do not appear to be enough of a factor in ensuring an inclusive culture in schools. This needs to be motivated and brought about by other means.

Ensuring improved capacity for inclusion and building in clear systemic expectations for schools in this area need to be key objectives in the refinement of the disability funding loading in future years.

Identifying positive experiences and good practice is an important component of the work that lies ahead, however it needs to be done in much greater detail than this consultation allowed. In order for this to properly inform the work on the disability loading, CDA recommends that the Department of Education undertake detailed research into the design, cost and effectiveness of delivering inclusive education at identified exemplar schools across Australia. This proposal has been raised previously by CDA and would be welcomed by parents and students as a way of articulating the standard that is needed and the funding required for inclusion to be a core part of education delivery.

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APPENDIX A

Education - Your Experience: Contributions Sought

As part of our commitment to improve education for students with disability, Children with Disability Australia (CDA) is preparing a paper for the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) on the essential elements of a quality education program

The aim of the paper is to inform the government about what schools can do to provide the best possible teaching, learning and personal development for students with disability. CDA wants to capture the contributions that students and parents make to a quality education experience. We are interested in hearing about experiences in primary, secondary, special, government or non-government schools.

It is crucial that the experience of children and young people with disability informs this paper. CDA seeks your feedback on valuable experiences in education and the challenges encountered.

CDA invites you to contribute your experience, focusing particularly on those things that have made a positive difference. Whether it is a couple of strong paragraphs or a longer piece, we welcome your contribution.

What you tell us is up to you. Topics to cover could include: using an advocate, talking about the Disability Standards for Education, communication tips, school practices or even finding a good school.

Please send your contribution by 16 August, 2013.
Contact details below.

Children with Disability Australia (CDA)

Suite 3/173 Queens Parade
PO Box 172
CLIFTON HILL 3068

Phone: 03 9482 1130 or 1800 222 660 (regional or interstate callers)

Email: info@cda.org.au