

**Submission to the Parliament of NSW Legislative Council
General Purpose Standing Committee No.2**

**2010 INQUIRY INTO THE PROVISION OF EDUCATION TO STUDENTS
WITH A DISABILITY OR SPECIAL NEEDS**

The Learning Difficulties Coalition of NSW Inc. (LDC) is a coalition of individuals and parent support groups that provides support and information about children (5-18yrs) with learning difficulties and related conditions. LDC has a broad membership of parents, teachers and professionals and the proposals outlined in this submission reflect the collective voice of our membership.

In making this submission to the NSW Parliament Legislative Council, the LDC management committee would like to draw attention to the following behest: **that all children living in NSW that have any degree or form of learning difficulty and/or disability, are afforded the same quality of education as their non learning disabled peers.** In order to achieve this goal, the NSW government needs to immediately and significantly increase the number of school and community based professional services that address the issues of learning difficulty in children and adolescents, as well as provide for the training of all student and employed teachers in supporting children with learning difficulties.

In 2003, the NSW Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues, as part of their inquiry into early intervention for children with learning difficulties, stated in their final report that the following three significant areas of change are required in order to address issues of access to therapy services:

1. That NSW Health must embrace its responsibility for the planning and provision of therapy services to children with learning difficulties,
2. That new capacity building models, where therapy is provided in schools should be implemented systematically across the State, and
3. That much greater investment must be made in therapy services for children, with a significant expansion of publicly funded therapy positions across New South Wales. (p. 60)

Additionally the inquiry highlighted the need for universal access to pre-school education, including school readiness assessments to ensure the early identification of physical and developmental problems such as with hearing, vision, language and motor skills.

These universal access issues are fundamental to the responsibilities of “duty of care” owed to young people with disabilities by both government and professional sectors.

Evidence supporting the need for increased services.

The 2009 NAPLAN results confirmed figures that up to 20% of Australian students, across primary and secondary school grades, have learning difficulties. Similarly, a national survey of literacy standards carried out by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2006, reported that 52% of Australians aged 15-19 had a literacy level that was “insufficient to meet the complex demands of everyday life and work”.

A recent NSW study to determine the prevalence of learning needs, involving 14,500 primary and high school children, identified 17.93% (wave 1) and 19.10% (wave 2) children as having a specific learning difficulty (McLeod & McKinnon, 2007).

There is now growing evidence that children and adolescents with learning difficulties, including dyslexia and language disorder, are at risk of being marginalised from their peer group, developing significant mental health problems, and experiencing academic failure, leaving them vulnerable to leaving school early and facing challenges in finding employment. Psychosocial studies emphasise academic failure as a significant risk, which along with substance abuse, unemployment and juvenile offending have the greatest long-term psycho-social impact on adolescents with learning difficulties. There are many current studies that are identifying underlying learning difficulties in juvenile offender and psychiatric services populations (e.g. Snow, 2007).

In 2000, Ruben estimated that learning difficulties may cost the USA from \$154 billion to \$186 billion per year due to lost or degraded employment opportunities and the cost of caring for these people. Similarly, UK estimates based on the Rose Review of Independent Reading (2006) are that governments are able to save around A\$200,000 per individual in criminal justice costs, through the early diagnosis of learning difficulties and the provision of adequate intervention.

The 2007 report on the Australian Commonwealth project to identify ways to improve the learning outcomes of students with disabilities in mainstream classes (Shaddock et al.2007), identified "...an urgent need for further research and policy development in relation to the way (.....) schools can successfully include students with disabilities." The project identified some significant resource and funding issues involving lack of adequate time and funding for teachers' professional development, and inadequate provision of support and resources for students with disabilities, across the school system.

The Speech Pathology Association of Australia (2006) has collated information from Australian government policy documents, and found that these consistently recommend training of teachers in the management of students with language-based learning disabilities. Similarly, a UK report prepared for the Secretary of State: "Review of Services for Children and Young People (0-19) with Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SCLN)" (Bercow, 2008) recommended the collaboration of health and education services in the "effective removal of barriers for pupils with SLCN based on a revised (...) curriculum" (Bercow 2008, p.8).

Collectively, these reports are pressing for the increased implementation of service delivery options for supporting young people with learning disabilities. The need for increased training of all student and employed teachers in how to support children with learning disabilities is consistently highlighted.

Provision of services in NSW for students with learning difficulties.

Despite the growing and indisputable need for early intervention, and regular, long-term support, for the population with learning disabilities and special needs, Australia lags behind other developed countries in the provision of school-based learning support, and NSW now has an unenviable reputation for being the worst of all the states and territories in this respect. For example, Education Queensland has mandated support services for all students identified with learning difficulties, at all stages of schooling, and most other states and territories employ specialist professionals, such as speech pathologists, to work with children with learning difficulties in their public schools. A "Centre for Excellence", the Glenleighden School in Brisbane, Queensland, provides a full-time program involving a multi-disciplinary team of specialist teachers and other professionals, for children with severe childhood language and related disorders. It is the only facility of its kind in Australia, and is seen as a prime example of an evidence-based, best practice approach to supporting children with disabilities and special needs.

The following is reported from a Speech Pathology Australia briefing paper, 2006:

In Western Australia, South Australia and Victoria, guidelines for assessment of school aged students for language disorder and therefore access to funding from their education departments have been or are being revised. In Northern Territory, Tasmania and New South Wales, school aged students with language

impairments access programs and are not labeled to receive individualized funding support. Currently Education Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory (DE&T) use inclusionary (e.g. language skills at least two standard deviations from the mean) and exclusionary criteria (e.g. no evidence of hearing impairment) to identify a student with language impairment to receive individualized funding.

This highlights the fact that, even though there are epidemiological data identifying the large numbers of children and adolescents with language impairment in primary and high schools, New South Wales does not recognise language impairment as a specific disability for support services and funding allocation purposes, whereas the majority of other states allocate funding for support services through their education departments.

Children with learning difficulties need to have individualised and consistent learning support at all stages of their school life. This is attained through the direct and indirect involvement of across-profession service providers, such as learning support/special education teachers, educational psychologists, speech pathologists, occupational therapists and autism outreach teachers. Without this support, children with learning difficulties are highly unlikely to be able to develop adequate literacy skills, to access the teaching curriculum and to achieve to the best of their abilities.

Many students with an intellectual disability or a conduct disorder benefit significantly from a curriculum tailored to their individual needs. In most cases, however, they are mainly exposed to the normal curriculum, which is inappropriate to their special needs. For autistic students, for example, there is often a strong case for a tailored sensory program, overseen by specialist professionals, to be a significant part of their curriculum. Equally, a stronger emphasis on life skills and day-to-day activities is far more appropriate than attempts to teach them more esoteric subjects.

In the NSW Department of Education and Training 2006 document Quality Teaching in NSW Public Schools, the department promised to deliver on 6 major principles, including the following: “*That students have equitable access to quality learning experiences.*” There is little sign of this being implemented. Instead the media has become rife with news of support service cut-backs e.g. Palm Avenue School (Dalwood), TAFE Year 10 and Year 12 equivalent courses and learning support teacher services. The current State government and DET are trying to amend the Learning Assistance Program (LAP) in schools, by replacing specialist staff, such as autism outreach teachers, with general non-specialist teachers. This removal of essential services is obviously of extreme concern to those involved with supporting children with learning difficulties, and is seen as a giant step backwards.

Benefits of increased service provision for children and adolescents with learning disabilities.

- Immediate benefits to each individual student’s sense of well-being and personal achievement
- Improvement in state-wide literacy levels
- Improvement in state and national literacy and numeracy test results
- Higher school retention rates (Years 10-12).
- Reduced numbers of young people seeking mental health services, drawing unemployment benefits and becoming statistics in the juvenile justice system, with associated and significant cost savings.

We thank the committee for addressing the needs of the population in NSW with learning disability and respectfully request active consideration of our recommendations.

LDC Committee

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