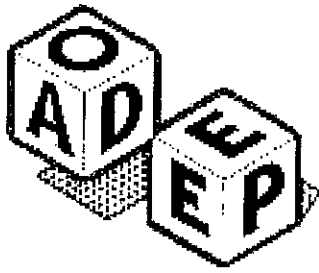


**Submission
No 382**

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

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1.A submission to the Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs.

The Orange and District Early Education Program (known as ODEEP) provides early childhood intervention services to children aged from birth to school enrolment who have a disability and/or developmental delay and their families. Services are provided in the local government areas of Orange, Cabonne and Blayney in the Central West of NSW. The service has been in operation for 22 years.

ODEEP recognises the importance of each family experiencing a planned and coordinated approach when transitioning their child to school. To this end ODEEP works closely with families and schools to facilitate a supportive and informative transition process. Each year between 10 and 25 children transition from ODEEP to schools in our area. This includes mainstream placements, supported classes and a special school.

1. The nature , level and adequacy of funding for the education of children with a disability.

- Not all children with an identified disability qualify for funding and those who do frequently receive less than required.
- Families of children with a mild intellectual delay or a severe communication delay are told that their children are ineligible to apply for additional support funding other than that which is available within the

A service for families of children 0-6 years with special needs

school budget. The nature and extent of the support which these children receive therefore varies between schools. These same children would have been eligible for funding support during their early childhood years due to the degree and complexity of their needs and the implication for their learning.

- Funding is frequently lower than is required as it does not take into account the child's functioning in a school environment which is typically noisy, busy, diverse and full of change and distractions as opposed to the one to one controlled testing situation which therapy and medical reports are often based upon.
- Classroom teachers report that they feel unable to cater for the needs of children with a disability as they do not have the necessary training, do not receive the support from the system and do not have the time to program individually.
- They also report that it can be extremely disruptive having teachers aides in and out of their classrooms as they move around the school providing the designated support time to each child across the school.
- A common practice when a child with significant needs is underfunded or not funded at all is to place them in a class with a child who is receiving funding for their diagnosed disability. On a number of occasions we have seen that the funded child may be quieter and less disruptive in class (although they may in fact be having tremendous difficulty in accessing the curriculum) and can be overlooked by the need for the aide to attend to another more demanding (but unfunded) child.

- We have also had situations where a child with extremely high needs may not receive sufficient funding to be supported at school for the full day so the family is asked to restrict their attendance at school to part of each day.
- The nature and level of funding varies between the various school systems- state, independent, Catholic e.t.c

2. Best Practice

- Families are supported to make the most informed choice regarding their child's educational setting however due to the late notification of funding to families this is extremely difficult as they don't know how much support their child will receive in a mainstream school setting until December and sometimes not until they return to school on February.
- Funding applications for equipment and support are often approved or rejected by schools too late in the year. Families are left worrying about the adequacy of the amount of support late in the year often when school closes for summer.

3. The level and adequacy of current special education places within the education system.

- In Orange there are very few support classes and they are located in the most disadvantaged areas of Orange.. This and other related factors make the support classes a very difficult option for a large number of families to take up.

4. The adequacy of integrated support services for children with a disability in mainstream settings such as school classrooms.

- The process of applying for specialized equipment is poorly managed and slow. In our experience the process can take up to 12 months prior to school commencement– the child who may require specialized seating often will start school without necessary equipment to fully and equally access the school classroom environment. This places additional pressure on the family, the teaching staff and other external agencies to provide “stop-gap” measures to get the child through until the order arrives.
- Specialized equipment prescribed by therapists prior to starting school is not always funded due to the cost. This means that the therapist is then required to start the process of applying for equipment over again by re-prescribing the child with a less than recommended piece of equipment that fits the funding not necessarily the child.
- We regularly experience a poor transfer of information between ODEEP/external agencies and the kindergarten teachers regarding the child’s needs and strategies to assist their inclusion. These reports are often used to obtain funding but are not transferred with the child into the classroom environment.

7. The provision of adequate teaching training, both in terms of pre-service and ongoing professional training.

- Mainstream placements are often seen to fail by 3rd class and more commonly high school. Teachers site lack of training to individualise programs and poor access to the itinerant staff as key reasons why they believe that a child would be “better off” in the special school..

Funding levels do not provide sufficient support in the classrooms to implement the individualised programs.

- School budgets do not seem to allow for sufficient ongoing professional development across the school. Much of this occurs in Sydney and incurs travel and accommodation costs.

8 Other

- The process of transitioning to school is very traumatic for families of young children with disabilities. There are always tears and parent/carer anxiety levels increase significantly. At our service this group of families requires additional support from our family support worker and psychologist. One would have to question why this process should be so traumatic. Our observations over many years suggests that families become very confused about the real options available. They receive mixed and at times conflicting messages from DET personnel, family advocacy groups and the schools themselves. The success of the process relies heavily upon the attitude of the school principal towards inclusive education and the principal's readiness to work with the family and other professionals to meet the child's needs.
- An early childhood intervention service such as ODEEP is not funded to continue to work with the child, family and school once school enrolment has commenced. This would be extremely beneficial to enable a smooth and well supported start at this critical period for everyone involved. Last year our service was able to use some fundraising money in order to run a pilot program where an ODEEP educator continued to support the transition of 11 children with

disabilities during their first term of kindergarten. The feedback from this pilot was overwhelmingly positive from the families and the schools. It would be excellent to be able to provide this support over the whole of the first year at school.

This submission was prepared by Robyn Brice

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