Funding key to helping students with a disability realise potential

SSTUWA
State School Teachers' Union of WA

This opinion piece has been written by AEU Federal President Correna Haythorpe.

If there is one challenge that our new Education Minister needs to meet straight away – it is making sure every child with disability in Australia can get a decent education.

Children with disability need to be able to participate at school, and get an education that lets them realise their potential.

At the moment that is not happening. Every school in Australia is dealing with the challenge of educating students with disability with inadequate resources.

While extreme examples of shocking practice make headlines, what gets lost is the daily struggle of schools to offer an inclusive, quality education to students with disability, when their funding needs are not met by governments.

In-class support, specialist services like speech pathology, equipment and individual lesson plans make a big difference but cost money from already stretched school budgets.

A Senate Inquiry into resourcing of disability education in our schools is hearing that thousands of students across Australia are missing out on the support they need – and that this will have long-term negative effects on their lives.

This message is not just coming from teachers, it is coming from parents and medical professionals.

A disability can be a barrier to learning, but we need to make sure that a lack of resources doesn't make it an insurmountable barrier.

The difference that can be made if schools get the time, tools and training to properly educate students with disability can be life-changing.

On a recent visit to Canberra with parents of children with disability to speak to MPs about this issue, I was told of an 11-year-old child with severe autism, who had recently shifted into a mainstream school.

Before arriving at the school this child had never spoken, yet with the assistance of a support worker, the stimulation of other children, and specialised communication software, he had spoken his first words. Imagine how that makes a teacher and a parent feel.

Yet the funding that allows this child two-hours of one-on-one support per day is continually under threat. And his parents know that when he goes to high school next year he may not end up in a school which is as well resourced.

Other parents told of shifting schools, or even States, in an attempt to find a school with the right programs to suit their child, and of the struggle of negotiating the bureaucratic maze around funding to get their child a fair deal at school.

Every piece of data we have shows that the funding for disability is far short of the number of students who need it.

The ABS estimated in 2012 that 127,000 students with disability in mainstream schools are not getting any funded support – that's half the total number. That includes 37,000 students with severe or profound disability.

National data presented to State and Territory Education Ministers in April last year showed that 13.1 per cent of students had some kind of disability, learning difficulty or mental health condition and that 88.2 per cent of these needed some funded support.

That is more than twice the 5.3 per cent of students currently receiving it, and doesn't take into those who get less than they need.

There are thousands of dedicated and passionate educators working overtime to support children with disabilities, but their efforts are not being backed up with the resources required.

The rate of children in our schools with disability, learning difficulty or mental health condition is on the rise, and is far outstripping the funded support available.

Principals tell me of a rise in children being diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders, a rise in anxiety disorders and a rise in children affected by family violence who require extra support.

How do these children get the support they need?

At the moment most principals do not receive enough in support funding for students with disability. Our surveys of principals have found that 84 per cent reported shifting funds from other parts of their school budget to support students with disability.

It is clear that attitudes in the education system need to change, but a lack of resources exacerbates every problem, and limits the ability of those schools which are doing great things for students with disability to expand what they do.

The lack of funding was recognised by the Gonski Review, which recommended an increase in funding for disability from 2015 which would mean all children who needed funded support could get it.

This idea got bipartisan support at the 2013 election, but we have made no progress since.

Former Education Minister Christopher Pyne continually denied there was a problem, and failed to put aside any money in the Budget to increase disability funding.

The first comprehensive collection of data on disability in schools, the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on Disability, has now been completed. Every school in Australia has submitted their data.

This must not be wasted, it needs to be used to increase the amount of funding available for schools for disability.

Our new education minister must take the lead and work with States to deliver this funding to schools where it is needed.

This will cost money, but the long-term cost of allowing thousands of students to become disengaged, and to leave school without the skills needed for work and life will be far greater.

One of the parents who travelled with me to Canberra was Theresa Duncombe, whose son Ben has an intellectual disability.

She says that: “Our family has high expectations for our son Ben – I want him to have a great education, both at home and at school, and to go on to full time work and financial independence. I don’t think that’s unreasonable and I think our school system should be able to deliver that.”

If we want people with disability to become accepted and included into our society, that has to start at school.

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