

Special Needs Education

Recent research by a number of education stakeholders has revealed a dramatic increase in the numbers of students with disabilities - although a lack of consensus exists as to exact figures.

In South Australia:

- Between 2000 and 2008 there was a 75% increase in the percentage of students with disabilities.
- Of 14,891 students with disabilities, 13,864 were placed in mainstream schools in 2008.¹

Diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) such as Autism and Asperger Syndrome has also increased in recent years:

- Media reports suggest that in South Australia 50 children are diagnosed every month.¹
- The prevalence of the disability is now estimated to be 1 in 160 school children aged between 6 and 12.²
- Autism SA state that at least a quarter of the 400 calls to their information line each month are from parents struggling with education-related issues.³

Australia's education systems are failing to keep up with the increasing number of special needs children. The cause is primarily a lack of funding, resulting in three key inadequacies - insufficient resources & facilities, inadequate support; and limited training and understanding by school staff.

Facilities - Ideally, special needs students have the option to attend either:

- a special school
- a special unit within a mainstream school, or
- a mainstream class.

However, sufficient places for students, in the education institution which meets their needs, do not always exist; resulting in waiting lists and even children sitting at home because they have nowhere to go. Research indicates that students with ASD are excluded from schools at higher rates than students with other disabilities and considerably higher rates than students without disabilities.⁴

“It’s wrong that some children with special needs have to be placed in a mainstream school when it clearly isn’t in their best interests, or even worse to have to stay at home, because there simply isn’t a place for them in a special school.”

- Elisabeth Reich, parent of two children with disabilities

Support - While in previous generations, the focus was to simply care for special needs students, today we aim to provide them with a genuine education - however, special needs students require a significantly higher level of physical care than other students (often having toileting, behavioural and mobility issues).

Student Support Officers (SSO) are therefore vital, to provide physical care for special needs students, so that teachers can focus on their education needs. Current funding models, however, do not recognise the real costs of providing adequate education services and resources to students with special needs.

- Special schools are forced to spend much of their budget on additional support staff, leaving little or no funds for building maintenance and teaching resources. As of June 2009, the State Government is funding just 12 SSO hours for every eight special school students or 20 hours per student with severe multiple disabilities - not enough to cover even a full week of school.⁵

Training & Understanding - A recent survey by Whitaker (2007), of parents of children with ASD in mainstream schools found that many families were concerned by the lack of understanding of the implications of their child's diagnosis among the school staff, particularly in children at the higher functioning end of the autism spectrum.⁴

“Having a knowledge and understanding about ASD and the implications of ASD on a student's learning and participation needs is critical in being able to identify the ‘reasonable adjustments’ to successfully support students with an ASD in all Australian schools”.⁴

Academics believe that most teacher education provides little input on strategies for providing individualised curriculum for children with severe disabilities. Parents need to be confident that the teachers have up to date knowledge, skills, and understanding about how to teach their child.¹

As a result of high prevalence rates, the majority of Australian mainstream and special schools have students enrolled with ASD - and with the majority of primary school teachers trained as ‘generalists’, there is an urgent need for increased provision of teacher education and training to improve the capacity of current educational services.

Minimum training standards are also needed for support officers working with special needs children.

Recommendation

- The Federal Government conduct a national review to determine accurate numbers of special needs students and the real cost of educating students with disabilities.
- The Federal Government make it a priority to provide adequate resources and facilities - in terms of both special schools and special units in mainstream schools.
- The Federal Government commit funding to schools to increase support staff for special need students.
- The Federal Government ensure teachers are trained to teach special needs students and establish minimum training standards for SSO's and support staff working with special needs children.

References

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3. Todd, A & Williams, T, 2010, 'Suffer the Autistic Children', Messenger Community News, 21/04/10.
4. Australian Advisory Board on Autism Spectrum Disorders, 2010, Paper on 'Education & Autism Spectrum Disorders in Australia - The provision of appropriate educational services for school-age students with Autism Spectrum Disorders in Australia'.
5. Novak, L, 2009, 'Special Schools Spend Funding on More Staff', The Advertiser, 18/08/09.