

Special Needs Education

- Between 2000 and 2008 there was a 75% increase in the percentage of students with disabilities¹.
- Of 14,891 students with disabilities, 13,864 were placed in mainstream schools in 2008¹.
- DECS provides only 11 special schools and 19 special units across all of our state¹.
- Student Support Officers (SSOs) in special needs education are essential. As of June 2009, the State Government is funding just 12 SSO hours for each eight special school students or 20 hours per student with severe multiple disabilities – not enough to even cover a full week of school².

Despite mounting concerns about the increasing number of special needs children, education in SA is still struggling to keep up. Lack of funding is the central issue, and is resulting in inadequate support for these students; outdated materials and facilities in special schools; waiting lists; and even children sitting at home because they have nowhere else to go.

Special needs students are assessed by the department during early childhood education, as best suited to either a special school, a special unit within a mainstream school, or mainstream classes. However, there are insufficient places for all students to follow these recommendations.

Some special schools have a number of students on waiting lists who may simply have nowhere else to go, appropriate to their needs. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that children with disabilities often spend longer at school than mainstream students.

Special needs students require a significantly higher level of care than other students. In previous generations, the focus on special needs students was simply to care for them. Today we focus on providing these children with a genuine education - however, they still require a significantly higher level of physical care than other students (often having toileting, behavioural and mobility issues). This is why SSO support is so vital; these officers provide the physical care for special needs students, so that teachers can focus on their education needs.

The AEU and the Australian Special Education Principals' Association concur - the current SSO funding model is inadequate. Special schools admit they are forced to spend much of their budget on additional support staff, leaving them with little or no funds to spend on building maintenance and teaching resources².

“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

Recommendation

- The State Government make it a priority that adequate facilities exist to enable each special needs student to enrol in the learning environment which best suits their needs.
- The funding model used by the department to allocate SSO funding to special needs units and schools must be updated to reflect the true need for SSO support for students with special needs.

1. Djakovac, Lauren. 'Special Needs Students', School Post, Term 4 2009, Pages 22-23.

2. Novak, Lauren. 'Special Schools Spend Funding on More Staff', The Advertiser 18/08/09.