

# Special Needs - Interview

With Dignity for Disability's MLC Kelly Vincent

Earlier this year, Dignity for Disability MLC Kelly Vincent, successfully moved for a parliamentary inquiry into special needs education in South Australia.

As submissions to the Select Committee are being called for, Ms. Vincent answered questions from parents. Careful not to pre-empt the inquiry, Ms. Vincent shares her experiences and opinions.

**Q** *Why do we need an inquiry into special needs education in South Australia?*

**A** Since I was elected five years ago, matters concerning children's daily life at school have formed a significant part of my constituent workload. My office is aware of, and advocating for, a number of families and individuals who have felt disappointed, frustrated, isolated and disrespected by their experience with the current education system in South Australia. The tipping point came when the case of a 10-year-old boy on the autism spectrum being placed in a cage-like structure made of pool fencing in a Canberra classroom made headlines around the nation, and rightly so. That such a thing could happen in 2015 in Australia indicates to me that we need to talk about current practices in South Australia as well.

**Q** *From what you've heard, how would you rate the way parents of special needs children are treated by the department?*

**A** One of the things that needs to shift in South Australia, not only in education, is the awareness of disability. Parents often spend a lot of time liaising with their child's school, in some cases this effectively precludes their ability to hold down a full time job. We need to resource schools to adequately educate and care for children at school and our economy will benefit if it frees up some parents to get back into the workforce.

**Q** *How would you grade the standard of education and quality of care delivered to special needs children in South Australia?*

**A** There are classroom educators and school support officers who are delivering a high level of education and care to students with disabilities, we don't want to lose sight of that. As it stands my office often hears about the instances where things are not going well, but I want the committee to be the one that gives an overview, rather than me pre-empt the findings. I would also add that the committee is keen to hear from educators as well as parents. I know that there is currently a lot of work being put in by teachers without recognition, and this goodwill is important, but our system should not be reliant upon it.

**Q** *What key change is needed to improve the standard of education for special needs children in our state?*

**A** The relationship between home and school needs to be valued and strengthened. Students need to be properly accommodated, and teaching needs to engage them. Technology that can assist students with communication will continue to be a boon to their ability to learn, and it needs to be seen as an investment not a cost. One thing I do hear a lot is that school staff are not listening to the people who are the experts – students themselves, and their families or carers who know them best. That's unnecessarily frustrating.

# Special Needs - Interview continued

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**Q** *Will the committee be investigating accurate numbers of special needs children in South Australia? It seems a month doesn't go by without a new media report telling us that the actual numbers are vastly different from published numbers.*

**A** Yes, this is an important area that could be looked at by the committee, but once again I really can't pre-empt the thinking of the committee. A survey recently conducted by Children With Disability Australia, the peak body representing children with disability, shows that as many as one in four students with disability are currently being denied enrolment at their school of choice or are unable to attend school full-time due to a lack of disability-positive supports. Given that these families pay full-time school fees and do not pay their taxes part-time, it is blatantly unacceptable that students should not be properly supported to have their human right to an education met.

**Q** *Is there a common issue you've heard from the parents of special needs children?*

**A** I think it comes down to the relationship with the school, because some families and students are getting the communication and support from their schools and others are not. What is important is that schools take on their responsibility to provide an education to all students, regardless of their disabilities. Classroom educators need to have adequate supports in place and need non instructional time for lesson preparation, and they need to be able to access quality in-service training to bring them up to speed on the practicalities of teaching students with disabilities.

**Q** *My child's school doesn't seem to know how to deal with my child's autism (which isn't severe). When I complain or try to work out a program with them to improve things, they tell me he has to learn to do things their way or leave the school. We don't have much in the way options for his schooling. The school gets funding for my son but there is no program for him and nobody who knows how to deal with his situation. If there is funding why aren't there staff to teach him?*

**A** The above question could form the basis of a submission to the committee. The way that schools communicate with families about students is important, and having knowledge and information about the way the system works is fundamental to how families engage with schools.

**Q** *Can the inquiry look at teacher training in SA? My child's teacher has admitted they have no training in teaching children with special needs.*

**A** Yes, this is one of the specific terms of reference for the committee: "The current level of initial and in-service training for teachers and other staff regarding students with disabilities, and suggestions for broadening and improving such teaching".

**Q** *Will the right to sit NAPLAN, including adjustments for students with disabilities be discussed?*

**A** The committee will be keen to hear from parents who feel their child has been discriminated against at NAPLAN testing time. Under nationally agreed protocols, students with disabilities are entitled to sit the test, with some adjustments as required. It is the responsibility of schools to inform parents of their rights for these adjustments and it is imperative that schools are appropriately resourced to provide the necessary supports.



**Q** *Why can't we have expert assessments of our child's needs? Some parents have been waiting over a year. Shouldn't we be able to go to experts outside the education department?*

**A** This would be a good question for the committee to ask Departmental representatives. Waiting lists for assessments in some areas are too long, and with everything we know about brain development in the early years, it is not good enough to keep students waiting like this.

**Q** *What has impressed you most about special needs education in SA?*

**A** There is a lot of goodwill on behalf of schools and teachers, but it does not appear to be consistent across the state.

**Q** *What has disappointed you most?*

**A** Families contact my office about some distressing things that have occurred in classrooms and playgrounds, again it's not my role to pre-empt the information that will come before the committee. I do encourage parents, teachers and former students to make submissions to the committee.

**Q** *What do you hope the inquiry will achieve?*

**A** Acknowledgement that the situation is not as it should be. Increased awareness of the positive effect of good teacher education about disabilities, and how this can be implemented in South Australia. ■