

Special Needs Students

By Lauren Djakovac

Recent reports by the media and education stakeholders have revealed a dramatic increase in the number of students with disabilities.

The diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorders such as Autism and Asperger Syndrome has grown in recent years. Media reports suggest that in South Australia, 50 children are diagnosed every month – with the prevalence of the disability now estimated to be around one in 160, compared to one in 10,000 a decade ago.

According to DECS:

- the total number of students with disabilities rose from 14,834 in 2007 to 14,891 in 2008
- the percentage of all enrolments with students with disabilities was 8.9% in 2007 and 9% in 2008
- the largest increase was in secondary schools with 5,089 students with disabilities enrolled in 2007 and 5,272 in 2008.

According to the teacher's union, there has been a 75% increase in students with disabilities since 2000. In their submission to the Industrial Relations Commission in August, they claimed that the percentage of students with disabilities had risen from 5.2% in 2000 to 9.1% in 2008.

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Academics claim the increase in special needs students is due to increased awareness and understanding of different disabilities, combined with improved diagnostic methods.

There are several options available to special needs students:

- a mainstream school class with additional support
- a special class or unit within a mainstream school
- a special school.

DECS says that in 2008, there were

- 12,242 students with disabilities in mainstream primary and secondary school classes.
- 1,067 students in special classes and 551 students in special units.
- In total, there were 13,861 students with disabilities (93.1%) in mainstream schools.
- compared with 1,031 students (6.9%) in special schools.

Mainstream versus Special Schools

The increase in students with disabilities has reinvigorated the ongoing debate of special schools vs. mainstream schools. Currently, DECS provides approximately 11 special schools, 19 disability units and 14 other disability centres.

Some parents believe that more special schools are needed. Narelle Clarkson, a Banksia Park mother, is leading a campaign called 'The Autism Spectrum Disorder School South Australia', calling on the government to build four new schools dedicated to Autistic children. The campaign is also fighting for greater access to special schools for Autistic children without intellectual disabilities,

more special classes, and more one on one support for Autistic children who stay in mainstream schools and minimum training standards for student support officers (SSO's) working with Autistic children.

Most disability literature argues for the inclusion of children with special needs into mainstream schools. This philosophy is shared by many parents, however, other parents fear mainstream schooling will result in bullying, isolation and inadequate programming.

Dr. Brian Mathews, Senior lecturer in Disability & Community Inclusion at Flinders University, believes special schools play a part in the current landscape but can also contribute to segregating children from others in the community and perpetuating the myth that people with disabilities 'should be with their own kind'. He believes there should be more emphasis on special units within regular schools, staffed by well-trained teachers and support staff, with sufficient resources and funding.

Anne Bayetto, Lecturer in Special Education at Flinders University, says "parents have become more informed about educational options for their children and many are choosing their local neighbourhood school". Those who choose special schools want facilities that are close to their homes, which increase the likelihood of parents and children fostering links with local support networks.

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Funding

Funding continues to be a pressing issue for both special schools and mainstream schools. Recent media reports state that special schools are redirecting funding for maintenance and equipment to pay for vital support staff, with claims government funding has not kept up with the growth of special needs education. Parents, the teacher's union and special school principals are calling for increased funding to ensure every special school class has a full time SSO to assist teachers.

The DECS Disability Support Program provides extra funding for students who fall within certain disability categories. But the Primary Principal's Association says that these categories do not cover all special needs children and that some fall through the cracks - possibly leaving them unable to qualify for entry into any learning sites other than mainstream classes.

Parent Concerns

Funding and resourcing aside, the primary areas of parent concern are specialist training and understanding. Dr Matthews says that "most teacher education provides little input for young people training to be teachers on optimal strategies for providing individualised curriculum for children with severe disabilities, and most school communities do not have a culture that is inclusive of children with disabilities".

Ms Bayetto says "the enrolment of students with disabilities at any school is about preparedness, and parents and teachers need to work together as partners".

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This includes teacher preparedness (understanding of the disability, implications for planning and programming) as well as preparedness of others, such as administration, groundskeepers, other students and their families.

Dr Matthews believes that to improve outcomes, families need to be actively included in this process and be able to negotiate with educators about the factors they consider a priority for their children. A respectful relationship between parents and educators is needed. "Most parents would like a more planned approach to what happens with their children, and would like to be able to better predict the challenges they will face in the future and have more choice about available options".

To improve the current situation for special needs students and their parents, Ms Bayetto states parents need to be confident that;

- Their child is in a school setting that maximises their education opportunities
- The teachers have up to date knowledge, skills and understanding about how to teach their child
- Their child's school has strong systemic support. ■

