

SUBMISSION FOR REVIEW OF THE DISABILITY STANDARDS IN EDUCATION 2005

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mob

Introduction

- Thanks for this opportunity to share our experiences which perhaps is illustrative of the minefield for parents of children with Special Needs
- I did make this submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Victorians Living with Autism in 2016 but as this is specifically regarding my family's educational experiences, I wish for these issues to come to light in this forum.
- In sharing our story, I want to tell you about the kids for whom there is no (adequate, viable, appropriate, relevant!) educational placement in Victoria. i.e. those who fall between the gap.
 - those children not accepted by private schools
 - those who do not qualify for special schools and specialised settings
 - those who are not behaviourally challenged and so do not fit into alternative educational settings
 - those who do not qualify for aided funding in mainstream (government and independent) school
- This submission is regarding my sons' school experiences. [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] identical twins, born @ 29 weeks in 2004, both diagnosed to be on the autism spectrum at age 1½ years. Despite some obvious traits: stimming, delayed development, social awkwardness, they were happy and VERY compliant children. Behaviour problems have NEVER been apparent, and they have NEVER experienced a meltdown. However, my sons were discriminated against by several educational institutions. [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] thankfully, have not been aware of this but at times the experience has been devastating for myself and partner, [REDACTED]. They are now 15 ½, in Year 10, at the local high school.
- Anything in "quotes" is verbatim.
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[REDACTED] and [REDACTED]'s Schooling History

Early Intervention

This they began at age 2 until school age at [REDACTED], [REDACTED]. Here they experienced a range of therapies such as Speech, Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy, Hydrotherapy, social skills, dance and movement and drama. It was a positive, productive learning experience for which we are incredibly grateful. Peer support for parents was also marvellous.

Child Care

We were rejected from our selected Child Care in [REDACTED] as the boys were not yet walking. This was our FIRST experience of discrimination where we were not able to attend the institution that we wished for our boys. They instead attended [REDACTED] whilst still accessing Early Intervention.

Kindergarten

[REDACTED] associated with [REDACTED] initially were hesitant to take [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] as they were not toilet trained. Fortunately, they became instantly (miraculously) toilet trained on Boxing Day prior to the start of the year so were accepted. This then became a most successful and creative year, again whilst still accessing Early Intervention.

Primary School

- Our Boys attended a Bridging program in Prep between [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] was a specialist setting with aims of aiding transition to a mainstream school. There were only 6 students in the class. [REDACTED] was a small Catholic school and was recommended to us as they also had worked the bridging program for a previous student. This was our SECOND experience of discrimination. The Principal claimed that any funding they might receive on our boys' behalf would not be spent on an aid but on school resources. [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] were also deemed to be "difficult". I believe they were targeted because by now both boys had been diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum and so had a "label"; the class was overcrowded; there were other students in that class displaying anti-social behaviours. Please again note that [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] were compliant, happy, agreeable boys. Based on this direct discrimination, the boys were taken out of [REDACTED] midyear.... we did not want them to be where they were not wanted.
- Half-way through Prep, [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] were transferred to [REDACTED]. This was not our local primary at the time, but we chose it because it had a simple physical layout and was bordered by quiet suburban roads. Our boys weren't "runners" but we wanted a quiet surrounding to provide as few distractions as possible. The Principal, [REDACTED], who knew of our experiences at [REDACTED], welcomed us with stating "This is the boys' school." We immediately felt heard, safe and welcomed. [REDACTED] qualified @ Level 2 (10hrs/week) and [REDACTED] @ Level 3 (15 hrs/week) for aids. They continued with the Bridging Program at [REDACTED] for that year. We moved house so that boys could develop some independence by walking to and from school.
- With a great deal of support: aid, excellent teachers, leadership from the Principal class; [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] completed their primary schooling at [REDACTED]. Overall, it was an incredibly positive primary school education. They attended all camps, they participated in all school activities such as performances and excursions. [REDACTED] did suffer from a 6-month episode of SEVERE depression in Grade 4 which dramatically affected his academic achievement but otherwise they successfully graduated from [REDACTED] in 2016.

Transition testing 2016

- Through transition assessment [REDACTED]'s autism diagnosis was questioned at this time. However, he has low IQ and has aspects of autism in terms of being socially awkward. He also defers to [REDACTED] if feeling pressured.
- [REDACTED] scored mildly on the autism spectrum, high language skills and IQ is mixed scores. He does not have an intellectual disability but does display a processing disorder. He Would not be able to even begin expected work unless he had an aid by his side, simplifying instructions, keeping him focussed. He Would not know what books, materials to take to which classroom and would likely get distracted or lost between classes.
- There are many Issues with Transition testing as some tests can only be done in the 12-month period before year 7 so leaves limited time to research schools. We had [REDACTED] as an option from the start, but they would not see us until September. We found out until late Term 2016 that [REDACTED] did not qualify for an aid in Secondary School

Pre-Secondary

- Since 2010 I have thoroughly researched available information on Selecting Appropriate Schools for those on the Autism Spectrum and Disability Standards for Education and Transition Issues from reading articles by specialists such as Tony Attwood, Sue Larkey, Department of Education and Training, Australian Advisory Board on Autism Spectrum Disorders, Inclusive Education Working Group and Independent Schools Victoria Students with Disabilities Handbook. We had also attended an In-service on Choosing A School run by Spectrum Speech Pathology.
- Ultimately, we wanted private school education as both myself and [REDACTED] had gone to private school. My family has been associated with [REDACTED] since the late 1800's and we would have liked our boys to continue that tradition.
- Another option was for [REDACTED] to attend [REDACTED] and then for [REDACTED] to begin at [REDACTED], school then transfer to [REDACTED] if required. A key question we asked ourselves of each boy, "Was it better to be at the top: [REDACTED] or part of: Mainstream. What is in each boys' best interest?"
- We had been on waiting lists for [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] for many years.

The following are all the schools we contacted and/or visited throughout 2016.

Secondary Special Schools

<p>[REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] private</p>	<p>Both boys were placed on their waiting list as soon as they were diagnosed to be on the spectrum. All [REDACTED]'s literature suggested that they specialised in educating children who fall between special schools and mainstream.</p> <p>In 2016 Boys each trialled 2 school days in Year 7 here, separately. [REDACTED] was also observed in his Grade 6 classroom at [REDACTED].</p> <p>[REDACTED] would have accepted [REDACTED] but They Would not take [REDACTED] because, "he was not an independent learner."</p> <p>He, "got out of his chair and flapped."</p> <p>When we challenged them, the school psychologist/vice principal said, "We are a private school and we can choose who we want."</p> <p>He showed no compassion, empathy in selectively choosing one twin over the other because [REDACTED] was deemed to be easier. In all other respects, [REDACTED] fitted their criteria.</p> <p>[REDACTED] REALLY wanted to attend here as he identified with this cohort...possibly a rare time he could have made genuine friends. [REDACTED] normally is disinterested in the idea of school.</p> <p>We asked what we could do to prepare [REDACTED] to be accepted into [REDACTED]: Response: "He needs to enter without aided support." To not accept [REDACTED] into their classes of only 12 students was absurd!!!!</p>
<p>[REDACTED] govt.</p>	<p>Principal's delightful Response: "Would love to have taken [REDACTED] but his IQ results had peaks and troughs where our clientele generally were consistently low."</p>
<p>[REDACTED] govt.</p>	<p>Did not meet their selection criteria.</p>

Private Schools

██████████	Principal's Response: "We query whether the boys would cope with the academic rigours required by the school."
██████████	Head of Integration Response: "Not sure whether this is the right school for the boys."
██████████	Boys were accepted for Year 7 2017 but were required to sit College Placement Test in Grade 5 ...not suitable for a child who had not sat the Naplan. On meeting the registrar in 2013, he said to us "Children like ours generally do not stay at ██████████ for their secondary education even if they'd completed primary there."
██████████	Boys trialed a successful school day in Grade 6 here, separately. Principal's Response: "We have a very VCE focussed program. This may not be where their future lies." "No school can refuse an enrolment otherwise we would be held up for discrimination." "Our staff skill set is non-existent or rusty in the area of autism. To have expertise in this area takes time. We have not got that. It takes people with finesse and nuance to get the best out of kids and our staff doesn't have that depth of experience with those who are different."
██████████	Multiple aids on staff, fabulous environment but we as parents we did not meet the school board's strict Christian selection criteria
██████████	No vacancy

State High Schools

██████████	A large school, except for one building, all is only one storey high, musical, house mentor groups made this appealing.
██████████	This was our local high school at the time. Buildings were too high, ██████████ has low tone and tires easily and would easily get lost in the maze of tall buildings.
██████████	Offers a Montessori Adolescent Program but this was full for 2017. You also needed to be a local resident.
██████████	Offered some support services but the physical layout and size would be a minefield for ██████████
██████████	I don't believe they cater to those with special needs at the "lower" end of IQ

Catholic Schools

██████████	No vacancy
██████████	No vacancy and long waiting list
██████████	No vacancy and long waiting list

In addition to help find the right secondary school:

- I Sought help from Autism Counselling to obtain mediation with Vice Principal of [REDACTED]: they refused to do this.
- I Spoke to [REDACTED], Disability Coordinator, DEET. She provided some information re: funding. She was not allowed to recommend any particular school/s.
- I Spoke to Association for Children with a Disability.
- I Spoke to [REDACTED] Independent Schools Victoria Manager, Student Services.
- I Spoke to a few parents whose children had not succeeded in mainstream education or who had become a “school refuser”...these children were now being home schooled. I am a qualified Secondary School teacher. I value the opportunity being educated in a school environment provides, particularly the socialisation factor that our boys needed. Home Schooling was not an option for us!
- I Consulted AMAZE. The CEO put me onto the 2016 Parliamentary Inquiry into Victorian’s Living with Autism where I had a chance to present this paper.

We finally settled on [REDACTED] as an inclusive school who described themselves as catering to ‘quirky’ children. Mr [REDACTED], the Vice Principal, visited us at [REDACTED] and stated a commitment to looking after the boys. We immediately felt welcome and valued. We lived in [REDACTED] at the time and subsequently moved to [REDACTED] as we wanted boys to develop some independence in getting to school by themselves rather than being driven as we had done for their primary school.

Despite having aided time at Primary School, [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] did NOT qualify for aid time at Secondary School. Interim Funding was available in Year 7 for those who do not qualify for PSD funding. This, however, was only to support transition from year 6-year 7, so was NOT ongoing.

Despite the lack of aid support for [REDACTED] and [REDACTED], [REDACTED] were diligent and hard working in supporting the boys. When [REDACTED] became suicidal in October 2017 in Year 7 the school supported us in our pursuit of aided time and after I contacted local and state ministers this was finally provided for him in Year 8. At [REDACTED], [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] have finally had a chance to develop in a nurturing environment.

We are now having to find different opportunities for them for Year 11 in 2021. It is very doubtful that [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] will cope with VCE and unfortunately [REDACTED] does not offer VCAL nor VET. This could mean ANOTHER change in schools. Back in 2016 all we wanted was a school that would accept [REDACTED] and [REDACTED], one that was safe and inclusive. Looking ahead to what they might require in Year 11 was all too far ahead, hence current difficulties.

Conclusions

- Independent Schools receive a certain % of funding to cater to children with special needs but from our experience independent schools **DO NOT** take them. So it is left to government schools to take them but they do not receive adequate or proportionate funding. According to a teacher at [REDACTED], "60% of kids with special needs end up in high schools because independent schools will not take them."
- Government and Independent System base funding on language abilities whereas Catholic system simply based funding on an autism diagnosis.
- There are Independent Special Schools but only ONE, [REDACTED], caters to social and emotional needs...the others all have Behaviour issues as their focus. We do NOT qualify as behaviour is not a problem with [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] These schools are [REDACTED], [REDACTED], [REDACTED], [REDACTED].
- As part of re-registration each year Victorian teachers must complete a certain amount of PD directly related to students with special needs (this point specifically relates to [REDACTED]'s response that their staff could not cope with students on the autism spectrum).
- We had seriously considered moving to the Peninsula and even the Gold Coast where we found a couple of appealing schools but we had finally found suitable out of hours activities close to our current home: Scouts, Baseball, Swim lessons specifically catering to [REDACTED]'s needs; Drama at [REDACTED] (which expertly includes children such as ours!) These activities and supports were too valuable to move away from to an unknown factor.
- Aids!!! Funding for aids in secondary government and independent classroom is essential.
- Individual Principals make the decision regardless of how many questions you have asked in line with all the written advice and guidelines on inclusion.
- Victoria needs more Autism Inclusive Secondary Schools. Currently there is only [REDACTED] [REDACTED]; [REDACTED] and [REDACTED].
- I believe government and service agencies have Early Intervention down pat, primary schooling is a work in progress but there are not enough provisions for inclusion of a child on the autism spectrum in a mainstream secondary school.
- I know we could have appealed these private schools' decisions but how much do you keep fighting? I resigned myself to the belief that we wouldn't want our boys to be at a school where clearly, they weren't wanted, or their needs weren't going to be catered for and also where we as parents, couldn't work positively with the school.

I look forward to hearing positive outcomes from this review.

Thank you

Lisa Carr [REDACTED] [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]