

Achieving equality with long-lasting benefits

September 23, 2018

There's a story I've heard many times from a formidable leader in the specialist education field. The story is of twin students.

One twin attends his local public high school and has access to a range of subject-qualified secondary teachers like any other teenager in a public high school.

The other twin attends a special school (SSP). His school enrolls students from Kindergarten to year 12. He is in high school but his school is entirely funded as a primary school.

He is in high school but he has no access to secondary subject teachers. He is in high school but does not have specialist classrooms or a careers advisor at the school.

He is enrolled at the SSP because he has learning needs that require intensive intervention and yet he has no guaranteed access to specialist high school teachers.

Sound like a case study of discrimination from yesteryear?

Well it is not. It is the reality for our students with disability in SSPs and it is not OK.

Federation has had a long-standing policy that every high school student, no matter where they live, what their learning needs or what setting they are enrolled in, should have access to secondary teachers and a broad accessible curriculum.

There have been not one but two parliamentary inquiries recommend this way and Federation's witnesses to last year's inquiry hearing spoke explicitly of this inequity (see transcript below).

As we push for staffing improvements across the system in the lead up to the state election, Federation has prioritised this matter and taken a staffing proposal to the Ministry and heads of various Department directorates, with promising signs.

Federation is proposing the inclusion of additional secondary specialist teachers in the Staffing Entitlement of SSPs and has enormous promise at various levels.

Our students would have access to secondary teachers and as such the secondary curriculum "on the same basis" as their peers in mainstream high schools.

Our schools would have the chance to create genuine links among groups of schools, inclusive of the SSP,



with opportunities and requirements for cross-fertilisation of expertise, programs, equipment and infrastructure.

It embeds the prospect of action in professional learning for our teachers who are in SSPs and want to maintain or enhance their skills in secondary subject areas; and our teachers in mainstream schools to add to their suite of professional practice in responding to diverse needs.

The Department would have the opportunity to address its workforce planning issue by offering retraining to secondary teachers in a manner that provides teachers a supported pathway in to special education, with incentives and with an opportunity to bring the expertise gained from the training and teaching in an SSP back to mainstream high schools, strengthening the connection.

Our public education system would lead the way in reflecting who we can be as a society in ensuring and expecting equity and excellence in education for every child; another important step in realising belonging, success and wellbeing for all.

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GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE NO. 3

STUDENTS WITH A DISABILITY OR SPECIAL NEEDS IN NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOLS

At Macquarie Room, Parliament House, Sydney on Monday, 3 April 2017

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: We are dealing with a very poor historical anomaly. What is the impact of it? Should the Committee recommend that it be fixed?

Ms GOCHER: Yes. On the ground what it looks like—I am working in the schools currently—we are staffed and funded in a K-6 model but we have students from year 7 to year 10. They do not have access to specialist teachers, to careers advisers and high school allocations of counsellors and all of those things. So those students do not have access to the full breadth of services and curriculum that mainstream equivalent students do.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Largely they are being discriminated against because of their disability?

Ms GOCHER: Yes.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: How is it legal for that to be the case given the department's obligations to treat these students equally? You are describing a funding system which treats a high school student in a mainstream school one way with regards to funding but treats these students another way. Is that a clear case of a breach of the law?

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: The Disability Discrimination Act which is meant to provide equal access to education?

Mr MULHERON: We do not have the expertise to talk about the legality of it. We can describe the situation and others can draw the conclusion about whether it is discrimination. There is the reality that secondary students in a mainstream setting compared to students in a SSP school are treated differently.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Will you detail for the Committee the sorts of things that they are missing out on? It would be really helpful to the Committee if you can state the areas from year 7 to year 10 and beyond where the SSP students are missing out?

Ms GOCHER: I will do my best. We do not have specialist classrooms. We do not have science labs or TAS rooms so we are trying to teach those subjects in classrooms that are built for K-6. We do not have specialist science or music teachers. We have got some K-6 trained teachers trying to teach year 11 and year 12 subjects that they are not trained in. They do their best. They are modified. We do not have the cooking rooms or any of the specialist rooms that you need. Some special schools have, due to funding that they have used over the years, one specialist room. Some schools may have bigger cohorts so they have a bit more money so they can build better resources in that area but there is no across-the-State funded model for that.

Claudia Vera City organiser