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SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY AND REPORT ON TEACHING AND LEARNING – MAXIMISING OUR INVESTMENT IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

It is with great pleasure that the Australian Special Education Principals Association (ASEPA) submits to you the following points for the consideration by this inquiry. The Australian Special Education Principals Association (ASEPA) represents over 1000 leaders of specialist facilities across Australia, including:-

- special schools,
- centres and units,
- hospital schools,
- language development schools,
- behaviour centres and
- juvenile justice centres.

ASEPA members comprising principals and senior professionals who have the responsibility for leading staff to meet the learning needs of students with very diverse Special Educational Needs including Disabilities (SEND).

This wide range of facilities and members gives ASEPA a unique voice within education.

The following submission addresses the six areas as outlined in the inquiry, with each ASEPA input given with SEND students at its core:

(a) The effectiveness of current classroom practices in assisting children to realise their potential in Australia

Many schools in Australia have a quality teaching workforce that are able to provide high class teaching and learning programs for most students. Research has demonstrated, in respect of students with diverse educational needs, the quality of education provided is likely to be diminished on account of a lack of professional expertise. Most new graduate teachers feel that they are

inadequately prepared to teach students with SEND and indigenous students, (Forbes, 2007[1]). The preparedness of teachers to adapt programs and adjust curriculum to provide quality outcomes for students with SEND is also of great concern (*ibid*). Australia needs both to invest more significantly in initial teacher education to prepare teachers to be able to provide education for all learners, as well as in recognising the need to have teachers who specialise in SEND and providing professional development for them. In positioning schools and teachers to be able to teach all students, we have already lost a significant repertoire of valuable specialist skills and knowledge in SEND practices. If we continue to lose this expertise in a mistaken belief that this will lead to 'inclusive education' we will run the risk of making the whole Australian system vulnerable to a growing litigious society. Governments therefore need to value the ongoing need for this expertise by encouraging Universities to expand the courses they offer at both undergraduate and post graduate levels in order to support schools in providing effective teaching to ensure that all such students realise their full potential.

(b) The structure and governance of school administration local and central and its impact on teaching and learning

The role of governance is crucial to ensuring that quality teaching and learning is in place in our schools. Good governance structures form the basis for quality teaching and learning programs. There are few models as positive as that of the two Principals sharing a single inclusive site, as is currently being demonstrated in Western Australia. This model has the student at its centre, supported by quality teaching and learning. It comprises a Principal for mainstream students and a Principal for students with SEND. The two Principals work collaboratively to ensure that the site or campus is fully inclusive. All students wear the same uniform and share the same playground. The teachers from both schools participate on an equal basis in the operation of the whole campus sharing playground duties and being part of the assembly roster for example. The separate governance sees targeted resources going to students with SEND through appropriate teaching allocations, teacher assistant allocation and resources specifically for the SEND students. Money is targeted for SEND students though a separate school allocation managed by the Principal of the Special School and cannot be siphoned off to support other students for whom the money was not specifically targeted. There is targeted Professional Learning to support the specific teaching and learning programs for each school; some of this can be shared and some can be specifically for each school and their cohort of students. This is the responsibility of each Principal. Such a model needs an inclusive approach at a system level to enable Principals to work collaboratively with autonomy in an inclusive environment while valuing the need for diverse cohorts of students to be specifically catered for via quality targeted leadership.

(c) The influence of family members in supporting the rights of children to receive a quality education

For students with SEND the role of families and allied professionals is crucial. All programs for students with SEND are usually developed around individual goals. These are negotiated with family and other allied professionals who work with the students such as therapy services, disability commissions and Non-Government Organisations (NGOs). The role of the case conference is a vital part of any quality teaching and learning program. Progress is mapped against these goals and then

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[1] Forbes, F. (2007) 'Towards inclusion: an Australian perspective'. *Support for Learning*, 22 (2), 66-71.

reported to parents. Parents of students with SEND are their child's advocate and for some their actual voice. The quality of the information that parents can give to school via appropriate communication systems on a regular basis assists teachers' ability to adjust learning to accommodate their needs even on a daily basis. Schools that recognise that the parent is the child's first teacher and continue to view them as collaborators in enhancing student learning are more likely to have positive results in individual outcomes.

(d) The adequacy of tools available for teachers to create and maintain an optimal learning environment

While schools in some states and territories have a relative adequacy of resources to create and maintain optimal learning environments there are some schools that do not. There is much inequity across jurisdictions especially when it comes to students with SEND. For example, a telephone audit of the provision of teachers' assistants by ASEPA demonstrates that there are states in which there is a poor per student capita resource, whilst others have more substantial allocations. This level of inequity is also evident in the eligibility for additional resources in different states. Such inequities inhibit schools from providing optimal learning environments for students with SEND. Some government schools do not have the capacity to compete with the independent sector's ability to secure additional funds from their parent bodies. There are many schools operating with crowded and ill-equipped classrooms, and others with makeshift accommodation, the result of burgeoning school numbers. These conditions do nothing to promote the best outcomes possible for all students.

(e) Factors influencing the selection, training, professional development, career progression and retention of teachers in the Australian education system

Across Australia there has been recent debate about the adequacy of initial teacher training courses in general, and especially so in respect of SEND. We know that what effects the general school population in terms of teacher quality has a profound and marked effect on schools working with students with SEND. Professional learning needs to be school-wide. Professional learning needs to be geared to capacity building and strategic. Professional learning should not simply be teacher specific. The retention of teachers remains a concern for ASEPA. Research conducted in 2008 on the workforce trends across Australia (PASS, 2008[2]) indicated that special education has an ageing workforce with a worryingly high number of retirees. Moreover, there are very few Universities that are offering post -graduate studies in special education. This is linked to the move by schools to be more inclusive, resulting in a trend that no longer appears to place value on a continuum of provision to cater for students with SEND. Instead Universities changed their special education programs to include the term 'inclusion', training teachers in inclusive practices. This has ensured that there will be a generation of teachers which do not have the necessary level of rigour, knowledge, skills and understandings, fostered in the earlier special education courses previously.

(f) Any other factors

The need to maintain a continuum of service provision for all students with SEND is essential. Parental choice of place of education is one of the most fundamental rights Australian society exercises. Within an inclusive model of service provision there needs to be a continuum. ASEPA

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[2] PRINCIPALS ASSOCIATION OF SPECIALIST SCHOOLS (PASS).
(2006) *Report on Qualifications Sub-committee*, Victoria: PASS.

believes that inclusion is not about the place, it is fundamentally about the attitudes and values presented by our society within the place (school).

ASEPA would like to thank the committee for this opportunity to participate in this inquiry and is available to address any of these issues directly to the committee.

Yours sincerely

Fiona Forbes
National President