LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, TRAINING AND YOUTH AFFAIRS

(Reference: Needs of students with a disability)

Members:

MS A BRESNAN (The Chair)
MR J HANSON (The Deputy Chair)
MS M PORTER

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

TUESDAY, 27 APRIL 2010

Secretary to the committee:
Dr S Lilburn (Ph: 6205 0199)

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents, including requests for clarification of the transcript of evidence, relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the Legislative Assembly website.

WITNESSES

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Amended 21 January 2009

The committee met at 2.03 pm.

GILMOUR, MS PENNY, Branch Secretary, Australian Education Union—ACT Branch
SMITH, MS CATHY, Assistant to the Secretary (Professional), Australian Education Union—ACT Branch

THE CHAIR: Thank you for coming to this hearing today of the Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs inquiry into the needs of ACT students with a disability. I draw your attention to the privilege statement which is in front of you, so that you are aware of the information in that. Before we go to questions, Ms Smith or Ms Gilmour, would you like to make an opening statement to the committee?

Ms Gilmour: Thank you, Ms Bresnan. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with the committee today. The AEU provided a written submission to the inquiry previously. We will take you to a couple of points in that submission by way of introduction. With your agreement, Cathy will supplement what I have to say, since she is the person with major carriage of this area in the office.

From our perspective, we recognise that the vast majority of students with a disability are educated in ACT public schools and that most of them are in regular school settings. There are some, of course, in learning support units or centres attached to regular schools, and there are yet another group who are in special school settings.

It is certainly a fundamental position of the public education system that all students have a right to a high-quality education and that all students are able to learn. We are proud to be part of providing support for students with special needs in the system. As much as we support the policy of inclusivity, we are concerned about the level of resource support and the appropriate and timely provision of those resources that goes along with it.

Essentially, I suppose, some of that is a historical hangover right from the start, when inclusion became a popular and well-supported notion and began to be introduced more as the rule rather than an exception. Most systems—and I do not believe the ACT is any different—were actually playing catch-up as students with special needs began to be integrated into mainstream schools. There were insufficient or insufficiently trained staff available to support them and insufficient funding to provide a full suite of resources.

I think that kind of initial pressure has never really been addressed to the point where the pressure is off and it is just a matter of thinking that you would like more but you can manage with what you have got. Teachers and students in our system—and I venture to guess that it is probably the same in the non-government system—struggle for resources and would certainly welcome opportunities that would provide better and more integrated access. Certainly, the integration of access to resources has been an issue, too. There does seem to be a bit of left-hand, right-hand problem in the delivery of services. Sometimes teachers providing one service to students will not know about or have close enough liaison with other agencies that support the students in other ways. There is often not a consistently good and timely flow of information between all the parties concerned around the management of those students.

In terms of highlighting a few aspects of our submission, the issues that we think need to be addressed to better support the needs of students with a disability are, clearly, resource allocation; class sizes; retention and recruitment of high-quality teachers, particularly specialists in the special ed field; other professionals to support their work—therapists, nurses, counsellors and psychologists and, as I have just mentioned, too, other high-quality interagency liaison; and high-quality professional development for teachers and support staff in special ed so that they are not only across their own area of expertise but are aware of recent developments generally in the field that may be of use as well.

Public school facilities and infrastructure for kids with special needs is an area that needs some attention, of course. Another issue is workload and access to work-life balance because these are some of the most demanding students in the system. In saying "demanding", I do not necessarily mean that in a pejorative way, but their needs are such that they simply place great demands on whoever interacts with them. Finally, school-based management has a role to play as well in dealing with the needs of students and better supporting them.

We have made a series of recommendations and have gone to a number of subheadings in our submission, so I am presuming that you have had an opportunity to read that and would like me not to regurgitate it for you. But in terms of other material that you may be interested in, recently, on 15 April, our federal office provided a submission to the federal inquiry about the provision of education for students with disabilities or special needs. We would be happy to give you a copy of that as a supplementary piece of information, if that would assist the work of the committee.

THE CHAIR: That would be great, thank you.

Ms Gilmour: That is it from me. Would you like to add anything, Cathy?

Ms Smith: With respect to a couple of other key issues that we would agree with from the Shaddock review which came out at the end of last year, there is the issue of defining disability. There seems to be some incongruence between the department of education's quite specific definitions of disability, including intellectual, physical, vision, hearing, autism spectrum disorders, language, mental health and chronic medical conditions, versus anti-discrimination legislation which has a much broader definition of disability.

Our members tell us that, because of this more narrow definition that the department of education uses to define disability, other students who have additional educational needs may be missing out on additional educational support. For example, those students with behavioural difficulties, emotional disturbance or other behavioural concerns may be missing out on additional resources and, therefore, additional staffing support. That is quite a significant concern for our members.

There is also an issue around specialised services and, as Penny mentioned, working with other agencies. This has been a desire of the system, I think, for many years—to have some interagency coordination. That is something that we would support in the Shaddock review—the option to have some plans or agreements in place with Therapy ACT and the departments of health and community services so as to be more efficient around service provision and to be working more collaboratively together. I will leave it there, thanks.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. The first question I have is about something you have already raised, regarding staff retention and the training which teachers receive. I noted in your submission that the annual AEU survey for beginning teachers said that a significant proportion, around 70 per cent, of graduates feel training did not provide an adequate grounding to teach particular groups of students—disability, non English speaking and other complex students. What sort of training would you see as being useful or suitable in terms of disability in particular, because we are looking at this now? One thing that has come up, too, is that there is so much for teachers to get across now because of the complexity of students which they are seeing, how that can be worked into what they do in their day-to-day jobs and what training would actually benefit them the most.

Ms Gilmour: There are some really significant issues in this, because teacher training courses are required to include units around education of students with special needs, and they do. But unless students elect to go on a practicum experience in a setting that has special students, whether it is in a unit, a centre or a special school setting, they may go through their practical experience without experiencing that particular aspect. They will run across students with special needs in mainstream classes, and they will probably find the same sorts of issues that any beginning teacher finds, in that they are trying to deal with managing their performance in the classroom and the work. Actually identifying and managing directly and specifically a separate group of students is often not something that many of them have a good opportunity to do in practicum.

We have always supported a lengthy practicum experience in blocks. I hesitate to say that, because I am sure most institutions would not be too keen on trying to put even more practical experience into their courses. But what goes on now, even in the time that I have been teaching, is that the level of complexity of needs of students who present in schools is quite different from what I experienced in my training. Depending on the nature of the school to which you are appointed, it is possible to have quite limited experience of students with special needs, even as you are building up your teaching skills.

Some students will go into their teacher training with a clear view that they want to work in special ed and will seek out those opportunities. A lot of students do not have that view. I think that many simply feel unfamiliar with and ill-equipped for this, even though they have had general exposure to dealing well with the needs of students with special needs, because, frankly, it is difficult to manage a whole range of ability levels in a mainstream classroom setting, even before you add another factor of students who have specific needs that must be addressed. It is not that people do not want to address them; it is simply a balancing act.

What tends to happen by default a lot of the time is that you teach to the middle, and that keeps most of the students occupied, and then you pick up the ends—the high extension work or the students who demand a lot of your attention, whether it is because they have behavioural issues, they have special needs or there is something else that demands specific attention. So I can appreciate that many students may feel that their level of exposure in prac does not equip them well and, even as they go through their career, they are never quite achieving what they would want to in terms of expertise in that area, without pursuing additional training.

THE CHAIR: For teachers who are working in classrooms and are seeing that level of complexity that is in the system now, how can they be assisted? One of the things Professor Shaddock spoke about regarding learning assistants, teacher assistants, is that the evidence suggests that they may not offer the assistance which they should but teachers generally say, "Yes, we like having them there." Is that where those sorts of resources should be put or should they be directed to providing teachers with additional training in how to deal with the complexity of students?

Ms Gilmour: I think it is a bit of both. High-quality, well-trained and experienced learning support assistants can be a fantastic adjunct. With any kind of close working relationship like that, part of the key to making it work is the personalities involved. Sometimes it is a bit tricky in large systems—not that this is particularly large, but where you have a whole range of people. I think most teachers would have seen over the course of their career terrific support staff and worked with some of them themselves and would be the first to admit that that level of expertise does assist in making their job easier. But I think that the level of initial training and ongoing training for teaching assistants could be better addressed than it is now. People, as I understand it, do not necessarily have to have had experience before they are employed; they are frequently learning on the job. While they may end up being very competent and valuable members of staff, if that is their experience level upon initial employment, it does not matter how competent the teacher is; the learning assistants themselves will be struggling until they find their feet and get some skills in the area.

MR HANSON: Just to follow on from that, it seems you can have a scenario where a student with a disability, or a couple, are in a class, you have an LSA that has never had any formal training and you have a teacher who, other than a limited amount of training during their qualification at university, has had no other formal training in teaching a kid with a disability. It seems an inadequate way of doing it. It would be a surprise if the teacher or the LSA were able to realise the full potential of that kid. Should we be considering some sort of mandatory qualification for LSAs or for teachers if they are going to have a student with a disability in their class, to make sure that at least they have some degree of qualification? What is the solution? We seem to have identified the problem quite clearly, but I do not think we have identified any solutions to that problem.

Ms Smith: If you are talking about mainstream settings in a regular classroom—and that is where the majority of students with a disability are—teachers are trained in high quality pedagogy: how to address the individual needs of all of their students, regardless of what conditions they might have and what backgrounds they might have. So that is the first step, and that is a very important starting block so teachers are able to address their students' needs.

But around their specialist qualifications there are opportunities for teachers to liaise with other specialists—perhaps in the school or across the system. The assistants generally do not have any formal training, as you say. We certainly would advocate for the department to continue to upskill the assistants. They are already doing some of that, where the assistants are gaining some qualifications in special education. Teachers are also getting the opportunity to do further qualifications whilst they are in-service, which we certainly support—and we would like to see that broadened.

MR HANSON: But it seems that that is very much at the whim of the individual teacher and what they have an interest in or a particular focus on. So what we have heard throughout the hearings so far—and in the submissions, I think—is that the role of the teacher is fundamental. It is probably the biggest factor in achieving outcomes. But if those teachers are not receiving adequate training, or they are but it is only based on a sort of ad hoc outcome, it is difficult to see how we have got the systems in place to ensure that we can actually push students into mainstream education and get the results that we need. Is it five days that is mandatory training for a teacher?

Ms Gilmour: Yes. Under the enterprise agreement, each teacher is required to do five days, four system and school ones and one personal one. Most teachers in the system do many more than the minimum requirement of five. For that reason, we have had some success at negotiating some flexibility in how one of the days can be acquitted, so it can now be done out of school hours or on weekends. It is not necessarily having to be done in stand-down. Indeed, on any weekend, as well as after hours, whether it is stand-down or not, you will find teachers somewhere in the system engaging in PD—and usually in quite significant numbers.

My hesitation in saying, “Yes, you should make it mandatory,” is that I do not believe you can make additional training mandatory unless you are prepared to support it as part of the work requirement of the teacher. There are not enough hours in the day to say, “This is a mandatory requirement and you will now fit it in alongside your teaching, your preparation, your family life, if you have got one, or any other life that you might like to have.” So, in the context where the employer is able to provide some support during work time for that to happen, then it is worth considering. But the solution cannot be to say, “Yes, people should have a mandatory qualification base and they should secure it for themselves, without support and without recognising that it actually forms an integral part of their workload.”

MR HANSON: Do teachers get a support package—access to information? If I am a teacher and I have a child with a disability, is there an ACT government package that says, “You have got a kid with a disability: these are some principles; this is further reading you can do; these are the networks to all the resources; this is how to interact with an LSA,”—whatever that package may be—that helps them with that?

Ms Smith: It varies from school to school.

MR HANSON: So it is a school-based thing?

Ms Smith: Because of school-based management, each school would provide differing support, whether it is in the form of a package or whether it is in the form of professional development and staff support. I would like to say, though, that I think we would see a multipronged approach in terms of supporting both teachers and assistants. We have recommended, for example, that new educators should have a 20 per cent reduction in their teaching load in their first couple of years. That was actually around several years ago. It provides additional one-to-one support and mentoring opportunities so that they can gain some professional development opportunities during that time, within school hours. That is the key: there is a lack of time to be able to have those PD opportunities.

We have also recommended that the department continue to liaise with universities and CIT around training opportunities for people who are currently working with the department. But we have also encouraged the department and the government to promote teaching overall, and also to promote teaching with special needs students as a wonderful opportunity. We are not recruiting enough specialists into the ACT public school system. That group of people that we already have are quite stretched in terms of providing professional development to the rest of the teaching population.

We have also recommended a more structured network of professional development opportunities so that there is exchange between perhaps the special schools, which have this expertise and special ed teachers in learning support units or centres and those teachers in mainstream classes that need that support as well.

MS PORTER: I just wanted to have you talk a little bit more about the school-based management issue. You did refer to that in your opening remarks, Ms Gilmour, and also just now, Ms Smith, you talked about the fact that that has an impact on the particular subject that we were talking about just now. So I was wondering if you could talk to us about what your view is of the school-based management system and what direction you think it might need to go in around this particular issue that we are talking about today—and, if you have any other remarks, we would like to hear those too.

Ms Smith: We put a submission to the department around a school-based management review, and the gist of that was we would prefer to see centralisation of a number of roles that schools currently do. We feel, particularly from the views of the majority of our members—and principals may not agree with this—that there are a number of responsibilities that schools carry out that could be centralised. We would like to see a range of those responsibilities given to the central office of the department of education—around managing facilities and those day-to-day responsibilities that could be done centrally and would be much more efficiently done, rather than each individual school doing those.

Around staffing, each school makes a decision about how they allocate their staffing points. There is obviously a requirement around the number of teachers in a ratio to students, but then they have the flexibility to decide on how to allocate resources; staffing resources; and the student-centred appraisal of need funds that are generated when students with disabilities are assessed. So those sorts of areas are discretionary decisions at the school level.

Ms Gilmour: I guess the two things that I would pick up on, too, are where a student is identified as needing a support assistant and has an assistant working with them, that is not necessarily available 100 per cent of the time. The student might be in attendance 100 per cent of the time, but the specific individual support for the student is not. Just on straight logic, that seems a bit strange to me, in that, if a student is working in a classroom setting and is deemed to need support, then why is it that it is only one or two days or three days a week, if they are actually attending five days a week? How does that work in terms of good, consistent, high quality support for the student? I think that is a resource question that the system needs to deal with.

The other matter was in relation to the kinds of service there is provision for too. In the ACT at the moment there are a significant number of students of all ages presenting with mental health problems, but there is not much in the way of support for the younger end of the age bracket. That creates its own particular problems in schools, with not many options to explore to support those students to get help—nor with respite when they need intense support. That has been a recommendation that we have been making for several years—that the government needs to explore what options are available for students at quite young ages who have really significant needs in that area and are not able to be dealt with through the adolescent or adult mental health system because they are below the age of reception for those facilities.

MR DOSZPOT: As we are all obviously aware, the Shaddock review has recommended 68 options for consideration by the government. Now, at this stage, a working group has been established to look at the transition of children with special needs between government and non-government sectors, and there may be some logic in looking at this at some stage. But how do you rate this as the first priority that the government has given, out of all the 68 options that have been put forward by the Shaddock review—and can you give us a couple of ideas about what your top two priorities would be, out of the 68 options put forward by the Shaddock review?

Ms Smith: I do not think we would see the transference between government and non-government or vice versa as the most significant priority. Certainly the issue of transition between stages of schooling has been found to be an area that does need to be more carefully addressed. I know that public schools do focus on that with students with special needs when students are transitioning from preschool to primary, primary to high school and so on. So we would see that as an important issue for the department of education to focus on.

The main priorities that we would focus on are around collaboration with other agencies, as I stated earlier—more effective and efficient collaboration with those agencies. And we would be focusing more on providing a significant resource input into public schools, because we believe that it is insufficient at present. So they are the main areas that we would be hoping for the government to focus on.

MR DOSZPOT: Is that from both of you?

Ms Gilmour: Yes.

MR DOSZPOT: Professor Shaddock said almost exactly what you said at the outset—that one of his priorities is getting the definition right. I do not see any sort of reaction towards that. Is there any interaction between education and disability, to ensure that there is a more viable definition—or useful definition—of “disability” than we currently have?

Ms Gilmour: Certainly we have not been invited into any discussions around that. So, if those discussions are occurring, we have not been party to them.

MR DOSZPOT: Digressing marginally outside the discussion, there are children with ADHD and dyslexia who currently fall outside of the main area here. We are getting a lot of representations about the effect it has on their schooling and their ability to cope with the needs of education. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Ms Smith: Yes. I think I addressed that issue a little bit before you arrived. Yes, our members are concerned that the definition of "disability", according to the department of education, does not include those sorts of students. Obviously, our members are concerned with addressing the needs of all students in their class. The discussion around disability has been raised in the special education reference group, but we understand that the minister is working on a joint committee looking at each of the different sectors of schooling. We would hope that we would have representation on that group.

THE CHAIR: My next question is one that has been discussed a bit throughout the process about the SCAN process, which you have already mentioned. One of the things Professor Shaddock raised—and it has also come up from parents as well—is about having more of a focus on the learning outcomes you want to achieve, rather than the disability. You have discussed that to some extent in your submission as well. One of the things you also suggested and the question asked was about ambit claims occasionally being made because of the way the system is currently set up as well. What are some of the ways you think that that process could actually be improved? When we had the department come, they did talk about the fact that they were reviewing the SCAN process, to try and have a bit of a more outcomes-based approach. Do you think that would be one way of actually improving the process?

Ms Smith: We have sought for a number of years for the SCAN process to be reviewed. It has been some time since it was reviewed. My recollection of Shaddock's review was that he was recommending perhaps a different model of funding. We would support the linkage between individual learning programs—curriculum issues for students and linking that with the funding—to take away the gaming effect which Shaddock referred to in the review. So certainly it is very important to focus on the curriculum needs, and we would be agreeing with Shaddock on that.

THE CHAIR: And is that issue of ambit claims something you heard about as well through your networks?

Ms Smith: Not ambit claims—and I do not recall Shaddock referring to it that way, and I know he said something—

THE CHAIR: When he came and appeared, that was something that he mentioned.

Ms Smith: Okay, pardon me. He did refer in the report to gaming or this tendency that, obviously, schools and families were wanting to get the most resourcing to support educational needs for their student or child. That is understandable. The Shaddock review wanted to put more of a focus on the curriculum needs and the educational needs and the social needs and functional skills needs of students, and that obviously is very important to teachers. So, as I said, we would support the link between the ILPs and the funding model, whatever that might be. And obviously our members would be interested in being involved in that review of the funding model.

Ms Gilmour: I guess the fundamental issue is the size of the bucket of money that is available and the pressure that is on the bucket, depending on the number of students with identified needs that are in the system at any one time. And, obviously, as that number goes up, unless the money goes up at least proportionately, there will continue to be significant pressure, and we would argue that the bucket is insufficient at the moment.

MR HANSON: Just on the issue of school size and class size, which you referred to in your opening statement and is in your submission, can you expand on your thoughts on class size and then just say what you think about school size as well—whether you think that the size of a school is a factor—and whether it is positive to be bigger or smaller, or whether it is a factor or not?

Ms Gilmour: I certainly do think that for students with special needs the overall size of the learning environment that they are in is important. If you look at a new school like Kingsford Smith, for example, it has a really significant proportion—between 30 and 40 per cent—of its students that could fit a special needs profile. So it is a whole schooling size school in one sense, in terms of the number of students, and it depends on the individual. But often students with special needs do not adapt well to change and need the sort of constancy and familiarity that a smaller school environment might provide. So I think that is an important consideration.

I admit to a personal view that schools of over a thousand students are just simply too big. So I think that we have to watch some of that with our burgeoning schools on the outer rim. In terms of class sizes themselves, we have quite a specific policy position about what the student-teacher ratio should be, depending on the diagnosis, if you like, of the students in the class.

For example, we say that in early intervention units there should be one teacher and one learning support assistant for every eight students, and currently that is one of each for every 12 students. So we would generally promote an argument that smaller groups tend to be better. What we have said in our policy position is that some of the current ratios are okay, but most of them, we believe, could be reduced with benefit to the students.

MR HANSON: The government has a policy that is about average class sizes. Do you think that that needs to be moderated, dependent on the number of students with a disability—so that you might say it is an average class size of 21 but, if you are going to include children with reasonably severe disabilities, then that average is probably no longer an appropriate average?

Ms Gilmour: Yes, I think it does need to be looked at case by case. And indeed an average of 21 across the system does not guarantee any shift from class sizes as they were last year to class sizes as they are this year. Individual teachers in front of classes may see no change in the number of students that they are supporting, special needs or not. The AEU's position is much more in favour of a specific ceiling, such as a maximum class size of 25 from year 4 through to year 10, than an average across the system. And inside that statement around the maximum, we then have a separate policy that is described in our submission on pages 3 and 4 about what we think the class size ratio should be, depending on the level of needs of the student. But I have never been a fan of averaging. You can slice that pie any way you like.

MS PORTER: In your submission, on page 7, right down the bottom, where you talk about new initiatives, you talk about the number of new programs and initiatives being introduced so that schools can implement and assess effectiveness—you think there is a need to reduce those so that schools can implement and assess the effectiveness of the current initiatives—in other words, stop and have a look at what you are doing, see if they are working. Then, on the next page, where you are talking about meeting the diverse needs of students, at the bottom of that paragraph you talk about a list in the attachment, which is over the next page, in regard to recommended additional programs and alternative settings for the ACT public education system. So I am just a little bit confused: are you advocating we stop and think and then we look at those programs, or what are you advocating we should do?

Ms Gilmour: A little bit of both. We have now in our enterprise agreement for the third time a clause around the need to assess any new initiative or program before it is introduced in the system in order to determine: (1) whether it is a sensible and useful initiative; (2) what the level of resource will be for start-up and the level of support required in terms of training to make it work. And then an assessment of the ongoing commitment the system needs to be able to make to sustain it.

That is not what is well done at the moment. And, whenever a new initiative is introduced, regardless of where it comes from—and I acknowledge that some come from the federal government, some come from the territory government, and some come from inside the department itself—the consequence of not having a well-structured and well-rehearsed routine of assessing things, almost like the cover sheet that you might put on a cabinet submission, that kind of process that tracks through what the implications of a particular issue are, is that teachers do not have the time to sort through their current practice and the new practice and determine which bits of current practice can be let go in favour of the new.

So they just pop the new thing on top and keep trying to keep all the balls in the air at once. What we want to see is the system help out at that level by saying, in introducing initiative X, whatever X might be, we see that as an adjunct to these particular areas and we see it as a replacement for these areas. So, you know, we are telling you that we will no longer require you to do X.

An example that has always stuck in my mind is when PIPS was introduced to assess kindergarten students. It provided a great deal of very useful diagnostic information, but it did not cover all of the diagnostic tools that teachers had previously been using—so they started doing both. They simply did not have the time to sort through the current regime of tools that they used and work out which were a duplication, so they just did both and then worked on the results from there. I do not think that is in the long term a sustainable way to manage the system. So that is what we are referring to in talking about the need to assess and reduce the number of new initiatives: have a look at them and see whether they are a bright shiny object or whether they are actually really useful and long-term sustainable for the system.

In terms of meeting the diverse needs of students and our suggestion about the range of programs, that is drawn from advice from our members about what the gaps in provision that they see are for the students that they encounter in the schools. You will find in that, for example, reference to models from New South Wales that have some respite and residential facilities as well. There does not really appear to be anything that meets that need in the ACT, and there are kids who have a diagnosis and have ongoing and consistent needs, and there are also kids who have very special needs at particular times, when something happens that they fall over, and we are not often, I think, as agile as we might be at responding to the differences between the needs of both groups.

Mr Doszpot: Ms Gilmour, we talked about prioritisation in my previous question, and I have explored this question with parents, and the parents have been waiting for a long time for this review to come out. It is now out and they are waiting for some action by the government. They would like to see the adoption of the whole report, the whole 68 options, as part of the solution to the problem. The fact is we have now got a review, or a working group reviewing a review, and people are concerned about something happening. Can the adoption of the 68 options that have been put forward happen? Would that be a feasible opportunity—for this government to adopt them?

Ms Smith: I am a member of the Special Education Reference Group, and the view of that reference group, while Tony Shaddock was compiling the review and talking about the options—and I should say we are mainly concerned with the 10 options for public schools, as the education union for public school teachers and support staff—was that we would agree with the reference group that all of those options should be considered over a period of time. The options should not be cherry picked, there should be a long-term plan to endeavour to implement all of those options—and I am sure that would be the case for the non-government sector as well.

Mr Doszpot: So the 10 options for the public schools are the ones that you would like to see implemented?

Ms Smith: The majority of them are something that we would support. I am sorry; I have not got them here to refer to.

Mr Doszpot: No, that is fine.

Ms Smith: There are certainly a lot of positives in those options and we can write to the committee at a later date perhaps, if you would like, so that we can pick out the ones that we do prefer.

Mr Doszpot: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, Ms Gilmour and Ms Smith; we are unfortunately out of time. Thank you once again for coming to address us. A transcript of today's hearing will be sent to you for accuracy. Thank you very much.

HEALY, MS SUSAN, Chair, National Disability Services ACT

THE CHAIR: I welcome Ms Sue Healy from the National Disability Services to address the inquiry into the needs of ACT students with a disability of the Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

I draw your attention to the privilege statement which is on the table in front of you, just so that you are aware of that. Before we go to questions from the committee, Ms Healy, would you like to make an opening statement?

Ms Healy: Yes, thank you very much, and thank you for having me appear today. As you know, I appear in my capacity as Chair of National Disability Services ACT. But up until 2003 I was in the teaching field and I was a teacher in mainstream and special education and held senior positions in the department of education and ended up my educational life as such as principal of Cranleigh school. So I have a sort of educational background as well as experience in the sector.

National Disability Services, as I think you all know if you have read the submission, are very supportive of inclusion of students with disability into mainstream schools. But to do that effectively and to have best learning outcomes for the students and best outcomes for families and transitions, we do have some concerns regarding several areas: probably the leadership and knowledge and support of the principals; the curriculum, which goes along with teaching skills and programs and implementing those programs, assessing the students and planning pathways ahead for them, and that goes from primary school right through the transition through secondary and then out into adult life, so the transitions, the resourcing.

I know that the SCAN appeal has been mentioned. I happen to be a community member on that SCAN committee, and I do have some concerns about the way that is going at the moment too. But basically we feel that principals have the most critical role in driving what happens in their schools. The leadership, the knowledge and the support to their staff is essential in making these educational programs work, in helping staff receive the right professional development so that they are utilising skills and implementing programs.

I have to say here probably that resourcing you can do until you are blue in the face and pour a great deal of money into it. But, if it is not utilised properly and people do not have the skills or the knowledge to present that, that money is a waste of time. While the resourcing is obviously extremely important and the funding is very important, you must have the ability within the schools to implement that in the best interests of the students, for their outcomes, and for families and staff.

Curriculum: we are finding more and more, especially out in the disability service sector and the disability business area, that students are graduating with very few work readiness skills. This has deteriorated over the years and we feel that it is largely attributable to the curriculum and teaching strategies not being developed with the future needs of the individual students in mind. I have already mentioned that principals do have a critical role. There are other things, like therapies.

With post-school options, transitions and later year pathways for students, there is action taking place. I represent National Disability Services as well as Sharing Places as a member of the interagency transition committee, which involves a multitude of sins around the table, and as such I also represent the interagency transition committee on the relatively new Disability ACT and education and training advisory group on transition and systemic improvement for kids transitioning from school into adult life. We are working very actively on that at the moment. That has happened a little bit since the submission was submitted.

I think I had better leave it at that because I could probably carry on for much longer but it is more relevant that you ask me questions, if that is all right.

THE CHAIR: That is great. Thank you, Ms Healy. The first question I have is about what you already mentioned, those transitions, and that has come across clearly in the submissions. Quite a lot of the submissions that we have received have been about that transition issue. You said in your opening statement that students are graduating with few work-ready and life-ready skills. Is that something which is happening to students who might be coming out of the public school system and students also who are coming out of schools like Cranleigh or the Woden school with—

Ms Healy: Yes, I have concerns right across the board and the sector does as well, because Black Mountain feeds mostly the community access type services, and other students coming out of Canberra College and Dickson College and the kids coming out of the mainstream units. As I said, with my many years experience—and I am quite passionate about this—it seems to be going backwards rather than forwards. The business services are commenting on this, that the kids they are getting that have graduated from school are not as work ready as they used to be, which screams to me that curriculum and teaching skills and stuff are not—

MR HANSON: Can I just clarify: that is all kids and not just necessarily those with a disability?

Ms Healy: No. I am more concerned with the kids with a disability. Sorry. I am not sure about the other guys.

MR HANSON: That is okay. I just wanted to clarify that, because you said it is across business and across the sectors.

Ms Healy: Across the board with kids with a disability, from whichever school.

THE CHAIR: And that is the kids who are going on to the disability employment services—

Ms Healy: That is one thing that many of us have a great deal of concern about.

THE CHAIR: When you said the curriculum, is that because developing those skills has become less of a focus of the curriculum, do you think, or is it just that those transitioning issues are not occurring at an early enough stage in the school process?

Ms Healy: They are talking about doing that transition and the new transition services that have been established will start from year 9 in identifying students and pathways, but that is really very embryonic at the moment. I was saying the same thing 20 years ago. Professor Shaddock and I are old mates from those days and he sort of said we are doing the same thing again. What he was writing was exactly what we were talking about many, many years ago, and the action is not meeting the theory.

So it is not a new thing for us. It comes as no surprise to me that this is happening—that the curriculum has been scrunched. Maybe in the special schools or the special units there has been a little bit done with it, but it is the skills of the teaching staff and the way they are implementing their strategies, assessing and working with individual kids and their families. I am not criticising staff in any way. It is not their fault; they just have not had the opportunity or, it appears, been given the professional development and the experience to be able to develop those skills and really work with the diverse range of disabilities. By that, I mean people who have severe to profound disability, the kids with mild to moderate, the learning difficulties, students with autism and all levels of the ASD spectrum. It is a bit scary to me that the outcomes are not as good as they should be—and not as good as they used to be.

MR HANSON: As a follow-up to that, I imagine that 20-odd years ago there were more children with a disability trained in special education rather than the mainstream where the teachers were, I guess, better qualified, had more experience, and maybe the curriculum could be more specific towards those children, tailored to them, so that it could give them those skills for transition to the workforce.

Ms Healy: Yes.

MR HANSON: So would you then conclude from that that the transition of children away from special education and into the mainstream is a factor in the problem with transition to employment? It seems that maybe we have lost something in transitioning in to mainstream—that we have probably picked up in other areas but we lack those specific skills in the curriculum. Unless the curriculum has changed—and I do not think the curriculum in the mainstream schools has necessarily changed—

Ms Healy: No, they cannot.

MR HANSON: that would seem to be then the factor. Would that be an appropriate deduction or not?

Ms Healy: On a very broad basis, yes, because with the curriculum as it stands—I am a bit hazy on the current way they are writing up their curricula—there are those key learning areas where by year 1 they should have finished this and so on in year 2. They tried to push this into the special education schools in those days and we said, “Hang on. Our kids are so gappy that we cannot do that properly.” So it was a very strange time with trying to transition and argue the toss on what is best for the student and how the teachers can work it. I think that the transition of students from, say, the then special schools into mainstream learning units was not backed up.

This is something that Professor Shaddock would probably back me up on, because I tutored in several of his courses in the special ed thing that you see in the old days: the staff did not have the knowledge or the skills in how to work with those students. They were not sure what they were working for. The kids with these sort of problems need special work and strategies on functional life skills, and then you have got to do a lot more work on social skills, for example, and money skills, travelling skills et cetera to enable them to sort of make that transition into adult life more easily.

I think that has faded. There has been pressure on staff to comply with the mainstream curriculum as well as developing individual learning plans et cetera, but there just has not been enough support for the teaching staff. That is how I feel.

MR HANSON: A theme that we are picking up a little bit is that kids with disabilities are being put into mainstream classes but the LSAs and the teachers do not necessarily have the skills to address those needs. What should be happening, if you are going to put kids into mainstream, I would have thought, would be that the teachers have those skills so that they can deal with kids with a disability, but that is not necessarily the case.

Ms Healy: It is not, and when I was principal of Cranleigh I adopted a sort of open, swinging door approach and said to other schools in the Belconnen region: “We’ve got the teaching skills in these areas. We’re happy to share with you, when we’ve got time”—there was very little time—“and you can get in touch with us if there is a specific kid you want some assistance with, or some advice about.” There was no proper consultancy in the department of education; there is better consultancy now, and then there are support teams. But there was not any of that in the old days.

We were going out and working with staff in the mainstream to help them to develop those skills—I do not know whether that sort of thing is still happening—or inviting them to come in. But, of course, it is such a busy time that people do not have that much time. A lot of teachers were doing their post grad, because I was one of the ones tutoring them and helping to develop those skills, Especially with kids with autism and learning strategies, I think that teachers are not always aware of the different learning styles of their students. That is very specific with kids with a disability. You have to learn about a particular child’s learning style so that you can therefore deliver in a meaningful way for good stuff to happen.

MR HANSON: Assuming that we are trying to educate teachers to deal with kids with a disability, that we have been trying to do it for a number of years, that it would appear that we are always chasing our tails and that it is almost impossible because of time constraints, resource constraints or whatever it is, and it is not happening, have we gone too far in terms of pushing kids with a disability into mainstream? Have we been too optimistic? It seems to be a great ideal but the practical reality is that it is just not working as it should and that maybe we have gone a bit too far and need to balance it out.

Ms Healy: I am speaking from a personal viewpoint now; I cannot speak for NDS on this one, but I think most of them would agree—

MR HANSON: Give us your view as Sue Healy. What does Sue Healy think?

Ms Healy: Like I said 20 years ago, it is not going to work if you do not do this, this and that. Unfortunately, I think that a few of us have been proved right. I do not mean that it is a bad thing for kids to be included in mainstream units, if that is what best meets their needs. I was listening to one of the other ladies talk before on the sizes of classes in schools. But some kids will learn in a situation like that; other kids benefit more from, say, being in a special education setting in a special school and then transferring out and carrying those with them.

I think it has happened too quickly, too fast. I think the attitude of principals is "okay, it might mean a few more buckets of points", but it is a matter of whether those points are used effectively or not. If they are not there to support their teachers during the bad times, which do happen when you are working with students with a disability, teachers begin to lose heart, and they run away from certain things. With the teaching skills and the knowledge, there has not been enough done to help those teachers to develop those. I do not know how you would do it en masse very quickly because it just does not work that way.

MS PORTER: You probably heard me ask a question before of the previous witnesses about school-based management. With your emphasis on the leadership that comes from the principal and how important that is, what do you see as the influence of school-based management on this whole issue?

Ms Healy: Again, in the old days, I was on a committee when school-based management was first brought in. It was a huge change for principals. It meant that some principals were more business manager type people anyway, so they could cope with that, but they were not so involved in the curriculum. I honestly do not know. It depends from principal to principal on how they operate. They have put a lot of pressure on principals.

A lot of the day-to-day running and the PD would go to the deputy principals. I think that is what happened. I then left education and went down to Melbourne. But the rumbles went around and it was not an easy time. I think principals really wanted the power to hire and fire rather than actually do the hard yakka of letting out tenders and doing things like that, and that did not happen. Again, it depends on the principal. Some of them use their resourcing extremely effectively and do really well, while others do not, or they have different perspectives or different needs.

MS PORTER: I wanted some clarification because I might have got a bit confused. I was following the discussion that we were having before about the curriculum et cetera, the numbers of different kinds of children that you might be working with and the need for additional support that you said was offered through Cranleigh when you were there—that you offered that support.

Ms Healy: We would offer as much support as we could to mainstream, yes.

MS PORTER: Yes. You said that there was no consultancy then—or I thought that was what you said—and then you said that things did improve. Did things improve and now they are—

Ms Healy: In the old days we did not have the support teams that the department of education have now. We used to yell for them but now they do have the support teams. They are very thinly stretched, and they go across and work as much as they can with staff, and probably with the students, who have the most difficult time. They will give staff as many pointers as they can on how to manage that. But they do not often have the time to do the follow-ups. I think that, while it has got better, as I mentioned before about resourcing, you can have all the resourcing you like but if it is not utilised and managed properly, it is not going to really make much of a difference. It can sometimes make things worse.

MS PORTER: So where is that management happening or not happening?

Ms Healy: Right across the board, I think—across the department of education and at the school management level.

MS PORTER: Within the school management level. Okay, thank you.

Ms Healy: I was interested to hear that the kids are there five days a week and the learning support assistant is there for three, and that is true. There are concerns, too, that the special teachers assistants, or whatever we have now, still have not really had the training or maybe have really developed. I have seen some really unfortunate situations where the assistant has not got the skills to work with a particular child. But that is very broad; not everybody is like that, of course.

MR DOSZPOT: Good afternoon, Ms Healy, and congratulations on your work in disability over the years—

Ms Healy: Thank you.

MR DOSZPOT: and in particular on your legacy at Cranleigh school, which is very commendable. Looking at NDS's involvement with some of the decisions that are made, I am trying to understand how some of the decisions I am about to ask you about are made. The leaving age has been lowered from 20 to 18 years. Obviously, one wonders how such decisions are arrived at, what consultation is taken and what discussion there is between the departments, the agencies, that are looking after these children at the moment. Can you elaborate on that?

Ms Healy: There has been very little discussion with the departments and the services sector. It was flagged about 18 months ago at a very short meeting which left us all a bit stunned. Very little has happened except to be told, "Be prepared, there could be an influx of people coming out." This new DET-DACT advisory group will be working on that, I think, to see what the sector will look like. As I said, I am also a community member of the SCAN committee, and that has caused me a few concerns about the way things are done.

It is going to have an effect on the sector. It is going to have an effect on the kids that are graduating. I know that a letter from the ministers went out to parents a few weeks ago and there have been a lot of parents who are very confused. It is an old issue. I remember fighting against it when I was deputy principal at the then Koomarri, which is now Black Mountain. I said, "Hang on, if you change this, the secondary colleges don't graduate their students at 18 and they have mature-age students." So the department backed down a bit on that one so that students were able to stay until they were 20. We did not force them to stay. If students wanted to move on, that was fine.

There is not any real research to show that it does improve someone's education to stay on until 20, but I have concerns about students coming out too quickly and who still need that high support, especially kids in the very severe to profound area who have very high and complex needs. It is places like Sharing Places that will get those young people. We just keep working on developing behaviour mod and doing as much as possible with the inclusive stuff.

One thing that I do find rather frightening, and I think you heard me on this at one inquiry on respite care, is that one department is talking about graduating students at the age of 18 and Disability, Housing and Community Services is saying, "We haven't got anything to fund people with when they graduate from school." So that is of great concern to me and to NDS with respect to what is going to happen to some of those young people.

MR DOSZPOT: The question I am trying to address also is this: how is the decision taken? It is an educational decision, yet it has profound disability implications. Are there discussions between the departments on this issue?

Ms Healy: I think there have been. I do not know of anyone from the sector who was directly involved, so it was a decision that the department of education has made. Whether that has anything to do with the numbers of students at particular schools, such as Black Mountain, and easing the pressure, or whether it is some sort of financial costing decision, I honestly do not know.

MR DOSZPOT: Or what post-school options are being considered for these kids.

Ms Healy: Yes. They have sort of lumped it back on. As a sector, we all work very closely together, fortunately, so we can work together on that—NDS and the interagency transition committee. We all live in each other's pockets, which can be very helpful most of the time. But we can work together with those people. We are still not clear. All we know is that it is going to be phased in over a period of three years. At the moment we have no figures that we can really plan towards, or as to where those kids are going to transition to. So it makes it hard for us to plan.

MR DOSZPOT: This committee obviously will be making recommendations based on what evidence is presented to it. So what would you suggest to the committee in terms of what you would like to see the government do differently to make sure this situation is either corrected or not made any worse by the current decision that has been taken?

Ms Healy: I do not see that there is any easy answer that either prevents the decision being taken or else does something about funding and the planning that goes into it. I think the departments sometimes forget that there is a disability services sector out there that has to plan and think ahead to provide the best outcomes for the kids that are transitioning into adult life. Maybe I have been in the game for too long, but my major concern is for those kids and their families. The fear and vulnerability that they are going through right now is very worrying, and it seems to be a very cold-hearted decision. But, like I said, that is my opinion, not NDS's, necessarily.

THE CHAIR: Just flowing on from that, one of the things that Professor Shaddock said is around those post-school options and that institutions like CIT need to start taking a bit more responsibility for and interest in that as well. I asked the department whether they have had any discussions with them and found that they had not. Do you think that is something that we need to start doing, and that those agencies need to start—

Ms Healy: It should have been started 12 months ago because the decision has been made by the department; the letters have gone out to the parents. All those sorts of areas with CIT, the university and the service sector should have been gone into in much greater detail than they have been, instead of saying, "This is happening," and that is it.

THE CHAIR: So there have been no discussions with the sector about some of those programs which we can start working on? As you said, the decision has already been made, so we cannot actually go back, but have there been any discussions around employment services or about what are the sorts of things that can be done?

Ms Healy: Not really. The employment services are just as much in the dark as the community access services. All we know is that there is going to be an influx of kids, and we do not even know the levels of functioning and the needs of these young people. The new transition service which has started up certainly will not cover all of the graduating students who have disabilities. It is also a service that has come in from New South Wales and it has no idea about the way that the sector and education are run in the ACT. So it will be hopping along and trying to learn very quickly as well. It will not be easy for it to assist people in making decisions, in the first 12 months, anyway.

They just seem to have been government decisions. We do not know how many students will be requiring employment-type stuff or bits of employment, bits of community access, or whether they will be people who just require social participation—community inclusion activities. I do not know. I am a bit of a cynic but I would say that the 18-year-old cut-off probably has something to do with the numbers of students coming through who are at the severe end of the autistic syndrome, Asperger's—that rating. That means that, with a service like Sharing Places, we could have quite a few young people wanting to access us because no other service can provide for them. But, as yet, I am just guessing. I do not have any strict figures. The schools have not been responding when we have asked for some assistance.

THE CHAIR: Unfortunately, we are out of time. Thank you, Ms Healy, for appearing before the committee today. A copy of the transcript of today's hearing will be sent to you so that you can check it for accuracy. We will now break for afternoon tea.

Meeting adjourned from to 3.19 to 3.38 pm.

VON ESS, MS GAY, President, Autism Asperger ACT Inc

THE CHAIR: Ms von Ess, welcome to this inquiry of the Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs into the needs of students with a disability. Before we go to questions, I draw your attention to the privilege statement which is on the table in front of you—just so you are aware of it.

Ms von Ess: Yes, I have read it.

THE CHAIR: Excellent. Before we go to questions would you like to make an opening statement?

Ms von Ess: I am here representing Autism Asperger ACT, being the current president, and my opening statement would be that I am very pleased that there has been another review into education for young people with disabilities. You have seen our submission. I suppose my biggest fear is that this will just be another "visit the situation and nothing serious will change". That is very much the feeling of our membership. We sincerely hope that positive change will come out of the Shaddock paper and your review, your committee.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. I will go to questions first off. This is just from your submission and it is an issue which has been raised in a number of submissions and also in evidence. It is the issue of students going to segregated schools as opposed to public schools or indeed private schools. I guess the issue, firstly, is about inclusive practice versus a segregated practice. I have noted in your submission you say that it should be the choice of the parent. There are some quite strong views, particularly amongst your sector.

Ms von Ess: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Can you expand on that a bit more?

Ms von Ess: Autism spectrum disorder is a massively wide disability grouping. It is the biggest childhood grouping, as you will have seen and will no doubt know. The needs of someone who has severe or a profound level of autism and may most likely have a severe intellectual disability and possibly epilepsy are quite different to the needs of someone with Asperger syndrome who at least has an average intelligence, maybe very high intelligence. You cannot cater for the two groups all in one setting.

With severely disabled children, parents need the opportunity to have them placed in an educational setting where the children are going to be relaxed and happy and, therefore, able to learn. I can quote to you a case of a young lad who was eight with a diagnosis of autistic disorder. When he went to school his parents just took him down and enrolled him in the local primary school. I think he lasted two hours. It was totally the wrong placement for him, but his parents had an older child with even more severe autism and thought that their son was actually a lot more able than he was.

He was then transferred to a special class. He managed there quite well until the teacher running the class began doing a lot of higher duties. There was a lot of change of staffing and the parents decided that they would opt for an autism unit for him in a mainstream school. They did that. The autism unit had a great deal of trouble with him. When the unit at Holt closed he was placed at Kingsford Smith. It went from bad to worse. The parents were constantly being rung. I went in to visit the classroom. It was totally unsuitable, both in its design and layout, for this child. He was literally swinging from the ceiling.

I begged his parents—I very rarely do this and push parents to change placement if they do not want to—to send him to Cranleigh. He has been there nearly two terms. He is a much, much happier child. The parents are happier. They are not constantly being rung and told by the school, “Come and get him. We can’t control him. We can’t do this. We can’t do that.” There is definitely a need for a segregated setting. Equally, there are lots of children with a diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder that you would walk past in the street and think, “Oh, what a beautiful child,” until they lost it. But a lot of those children manage in mainstream and benefit from being in a special class within a mainstream school.

I do not think we dealt in any detail with high school settings. There is a strong belief from some parents—I know this from some of the school counsellors in the department of education—that high school students with autism spectrum disorder should have the opportunity of being in a segregated setting. They do not get the social stuff at high school. They are tormented, bullied—whatever word you like. People with Asperger syndrome often have high anxiety levels because they know they do not understand the world as we see it. Parents can have the most terrible trouble getting them to the education setting.

I know there are groups like Advocacy for Inclusion that believe everybody should be in a mainstream setting. I believe, and the association believes—because we wish to reflect the views of members—that parents need opportunity for choice. Choice may vary. They may start off in a mainstream setting and, as the work becomes more academic, more abstract, students may need an environment where they are learning more concrete stuff and moving on to learning daily living skills and things like that. I noticed that Sue Healy was here before. Some of her membership would go to Sue at Sharing Places. Others might go on to university and end up as a university professor. That is how wide the stretch is.

THE CHAIR: From the feedback that you get from the parents your organisation represents, is the current system accommodating that choice for them? It may be for some. You said that it might be fine in primary school, but then when it gets to high school—

Ms von Ess: High school can become more of an issue.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Ms von Ess: Some of the high schools that have autism units, learning support units with autism attached to them, do very well, but most of those high school units expect the students to do their learning in a mainstream class with everybody else, and the unit is used as a withdrawal area. Students have either one or two lines less than other students, so they can withdraw and regroup during the day. In the unit the teacher is there to support them and help them with homework or work that they do not understand. If they need it they will have somebody going with them into the mainstream chemistry or physics class—whatever class it is—to help them.

But immediately, if you are running that sort of a model, you cut out children who have not got the academic ability to cope with a mainstream curriculum. Then your options are a learning support unit, a generic unit which has all sorts of disabilities in it—and some parents are happy with that; others are not—or Woden school or Black Mountain.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Hanson.

MR HANSON: I will just follow up from that. It is fascinating, as you say, that Sue Healy made similar points and took it back in history to where there seems to have been a change in philosophy. The education system is now trying in some regard to push children away from special education and into mainstream, but the problem is that the necessary changes in mainstream have not been factored in. Do you sense that there is a pressure from the education department to get parents to send their kids to mainstream or is there pressure from other lobby groups? What is it that is making parents—in the example you cited before—want to send their kids to mainstream, maybe as the first option, rather than to a special school? Is there a stigma around a special school?

Ms von Ess: Absolutely.

MR HANSON: Is that what it is?

Ms von Ess: Yes. Special schools equate to intellectual disability. Having a child with an intellectual disability still carries enormous stigma, at least in the parents' perception. They would rather have a child's label being autism, which is still stigma enough, but it is better than mental retardation.

MR HANSON: At the moment we are probably getting some children that are in mainstream who probably should not have been.

Ms von Ess: Yes.

MR HANSON: Because of fear of that stigma. Maybe an objective we could have is to try and reduce the stigma associated with special schooling in some way. Have you got any ideas around that?

Ms von Ess: I think it would be an excellent idea. I sit on the special education reference group with the department of education. At the last meeting there was some talk about whether, instead of calling them special schools, we call them specialist schools, which would make more sense as they are specialists in that particular mode of teaching for these students. It is about trying to up the public awareness of, say Cranleigh. Some of the students there are literate; they can read and write. Most people in the public would not know that. It is just trying to build up public awareness of these schools and the good things that they can do.

MR HANSON: This is on the same theme. We see the problems that the diversity of disabilities causes in mainstream. If you are a teacher, you are dealing with autism, which you may not be across, and there are all the spectrums. Then you may have another kid with a hearing impairment or whatever it might be—the same in special education or specialist education.

Ms von Ess: Yes.

MR HANSON: Do you think that we need to be more specific with categorising that sort of thing? Should we have something like an autism school, for example? Or is it appropriate that people with autism should also be there with people with physical disabilities or other disabilities? Is it a similar problem to what you get in mainstream played out in special schools where you have a variety of different disabilities as well?

Ms von Ess: The biggest problem with autism is that it is a different way of thinking. These children think differently to the rest of us and staff, be they learning support, assistants, teachers, principals, whoever, need to be aware of that—because so much impinges on that—and truly believe it, because the children do need to be taught in a much more concrete way. Things need to be visually presented to them, clearly said. Keep your language relatively simple. A lot of them are quite good at talking but their comprehension does not meet their expressive level.

Most of us talk at this level, understand well above. For people with autism, it is the other way, and we tend to pitch above where you talk, so we open the comprehension gap. That is the biggest issue about teaching these kids—that people tend to tackle it from the wrong angle. Nothing that we ask the families and schools to do for children with autism harms other children. In fact, it helps them. If you put a schedule on the board of what is going to happen for the day, you see all the kindergarten children going up there and looking—year 1, year 2. But it has been put there primarily for the child on the spectrum.

I do not think within the special school that you get this same dichotomy between different groups, although you will probably find, and it depends on the actual students the principal is having to group, that those with physical disabilities will be placed in different classes from children with autism, simply because the children with autism are likely to lose it, have a violent what we call a meltdown—it looks very much like a temper tantrum—and a child with a physical disability might get injured because they just cannot move fast enough. Did that answer the question?

MR HANSON: That did. Thank you.

MS PORTER: On the issue around intellectual disability that you briefly mentioned, and you said that there is a stigma attached to that, one of our other witnesses mentioned that sometimes parents seek out a diagnosis of autism rather than another kind of diagnosis because of that stigma. Is that your experience and does that work against the parents actually seeking the help that they need at that particular time?

Ms von Ess: Currently, what I think is the biggest push for parents to look for a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder is that it is the “in” diagnosis in the sense that ADHD used to be. For the very little ones there is a wonderful carrot of $12,000 offered by the federal government for extra early intervention. So if you can get a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder your child can have access to that extra money. A professional should, hopefully, be professional enough to say, “No, this is intellectual disability, not autism.” But sometimes it is very hard to tell when someone is very intellectually disabled. Usually, you have to go on whether they are showing any interest socially or not.

In America in the 90s the diagnosis of an intellectual disability in California went down and the corresponding diagnosis of autism went up. They just switched labels. Not everybody thinks of having a dual diagnosis. Before Asperger’s syndrome was described—it was described in the 40s—before it really became a recognised diagnosis in Western countries from the early 90s on, when it appeared in the DSM-IV for the first time, 75 per cent of people with an autism diagnosis had an intellectual disability. That was just how it was. Now, because we are getting many more of those higher functioning people, people with Asperger’s syndrome, that has dropped to about 50 per cent. But it is really all to do with recognising the conditions.

People now say: where are all the adults with autism spectrum disorder? I can assure you they are out there. They may not have got a diagnosis but they also probably went through schooling when schools were actually more autism friendly than they are now. And by that I mean that schools nowadays are all about learning to work with other people: right from kindergarten you are in groups and you learn to work with a group and you move around and you change groups, whereas 50 years ago you sat at one table and you did not talk in class. When I was at high school, we sat in alphabetical order—I know my kids think I am about to move onto another planet, but I am not actually that old—and we did not talk.

All these things happen in schools now and they make it very, very hard for people on the spectrum who cannot cope with a lot of noise, who do not like a lot of movement because they may get bumped and jostled, and they do not interpret as an accident that bumping as a child walks past; some of them consider that they have been assaulted and will hit back, and then you have a big fight on.

When I went to school we learnt facts and figures—things that people with autism love because they are all good memory for dates, that sort of stuff. Now, a lot of the school learning is about interpretation of facts, and that is much, much harder for people on the spectrum, so they show up in classes much more.

I look back on my school days. We had a child in the class who was always the smart arse. The teacher would say: “Come on. Pull up your socks. Let’s get on.” The child would say “Please, sir—sir” and the teacher would answer “Yes?” and the child would say, “I am not wearing socks”. Then the teacher would go ballistic. All that child was doing was trying to interpret what he had been told literally. That is how they work. He is telling the teacher he cannot do something he has been told to do. The teacher gets angry with him and he gets even more and more confused. So a lot of them shut down.

I would not be averse to seeing an autism high school in Canberra. I think if you actually looked at the numbers you would probably find you have pretty well got one over at places like Woden. I am sure they have got lots and lots of kids on the spectrum. But when I say I would like to see an autism high school, it would be more for those students with average or above IQ so that their interests in things could be fostered. They do not need the social stuff. Their social stuff is based around their interests, be it chess, computing or this or that. It is not going to be based around—

MR HANSON: So it is mainstream intellectually.

Ms von Ess: Yes.

MR HANSON: But it is geared towards children on the spectrum in terms of the way that they learn, so the same way Montessori teaches a certain way and in other schools they have a certain way of teaching? It is more the method of teaching, rather than—

Ms von Ess: Method of teaching and, to some extent, the content. They need to be taught the social stuff. Primary schools will tell you we have a social curriculum. But it is much more general. It is about not bullying and being nice to each other. Children with autism need to be told in a very specific way that, if somebody knocks you as they are walking past or hanging up their bag, they are not doing it on purpose; it is an accident. They do not understand how they always get into trouble on the playground because the kids are all there playing with sticks together, the other children see the teacher coming and vanish or drop their sticks, so the child with autism is caught with the stick. And not enough teachers understand. It is called the hidden curriculum. It is stuff that most of the rest of us almost know instinctively, or if we do not we might be told once or, if we are not, we can read the situation and repair it ourselves. These kids do not see that they have got themselves into trouble and it gets worse and worse.

MR DOSZPOT: You have mentioned that you are on the Special Education Reference Group.

Ms von Ess: Yes.

MR DOSZPOT: From both your substantive position as president of the association and also as a member of the Special Education Reference Group, what is your view of the Shaddock review and the options that are being presented? How does that relate to your specific area?

Ms von Ess: I thought the Shaddock review was a very comprehensive review. The thing I would like to pick up most on that was the integration of therapy services. I know that this is not a committee looking at therapy services per se, but parents struggle to get adequate services and they struggle to get them into schools, where the children are for the bulk of the day. For some students, it is even just going in once a year and making sure that the seating and stuff is correct. For our students, getting the sensory needs addressed can be enough to sort that problem out.

I am also very much in favour of Tony Shaddock’s recommendation to do more teacher training. I acknowledge that the department of education has put money into training teachers, offering scholarships to do the training at UC, but there is nearly a child with autism in every class. A handful of teachers is not enough. I am very concerned that some teachers are put into classes that are specifically for children on the autism spectrum yet they have got no background in autism and really have not had training.

I visited a teacher in a school and she was desperate for help. I said to her, “You need to do it this way,” and she said, “Oh, I am doing it the way I have been taught for ESL kids,” English as a second language children, and I said, “That does not work for my kid.” She was telling the child to come and sit down and he would not, so she told him in a great long sentence, and she kept turning her words around. I just said to her, “That is that learning. These children need concise statements and you need to give them time to process the information, not keep on telling them.” So I very, very strongly believe that the education needs to be done.

I was involved in the positive partnerships program, which is funded by the federal government, and I am really delighted how well the department of education has picked up on that program and is incorporating it. But, even so, it is only a few schools that can go through the program each year. I would just love to see all schools having to spend one day, or even half a day, a year on ASD, and all teachers who have got a child in their class doing some training before they see the child. They can do more afterwards, but so much damage can be done in those first few days, both to the teacher’s and the child’s confidence and also to the parents’ self-esteem and confidence in the school and the teacher.

MR DOSZPOT: We had a previous witness answer some questions regarding the fact that the school leaving age has been dropped from 20 to 18. What impact does that have on—

Ms von Ess: It will have an enormous impact. Now, often the mother has to leave work. I do not know what proportion of students get fully funded when they leave school, but I do not think by any means it is 100 per cent. I would think it is much closer to 30 per cent. Somebody has to be there. If they are not capable or able to have a job or something like that, they tend to need to be supervised. I think that they still are in urgent need of education and, if anything, the education level should be going up. We offer our other students university training after school. I think 18 as a cut-off would be fine, if there is something more, but currently there is not enough out there.

MR DOSZPOT: Was your group, the special education reference group, consulted on this move?

Ms von Ess: I missed a meeting but, as far as I am aware, no.

MR DOSZPOT: There is no recourse to you as a group to make recommendations to the government?

Ms von Ess: We have not officially been told.

MR DOSZPOT: You have not officially been told?

Ms von Ess: No.

MR DOSZPOT: I will continue with that in a different arena. Can I just ask you one more question, with your indulgence, Madam Chair. It appears that with the better diagnosis of autism, or different diagnoses, we are getting more and more children diagnosed with autism than we did, say, 10 years ago.

Ms von Ess: Absolutely.

MR DOSZPOT: In a way, from the evidence that we are hearing, we are doing less in many ways, or in different ways, than we did.

Ms von Ess: I do not think that service provision has kept up with the number of students. Some things have. My background is in teaching and I have been involved in early intervention in Canberra since 1971. In terms of autism preschool, in the 1990s—it was a three and four-year-old program—there was one autism preschool with two groups. They took eight children. The department of education has come to the party on that and there are now four in different locations. I know three of them are full-time and I am not sure about the fourth.

So there has been an increase there. But one of the teachers was put in with no idea of what she was doing. I think I have mentioned that if you have to put in someone who does not know what to do, train her for two weeks with another teacher. Give her a mentor. Do not just throw her out to the wolves. Because the parents know—they get on the internet and they talk. They know a lot about it and it is quite intimidating for a teacher who is struggling. The department has also increased the number of communication and social awareness playgroups. I actually set those up. It is not a name that describes very well what they do, but we could never come up with anything else. It is an early intervention group for two-year-olds. The department of education has increased the number of those.

I feel that the biggest gap is in the increase of therapy services. The department has increased the number of learning support units, autism, in both primary and high schools. They are reluctant to run any more. I believe this year they have some vacancies, but it changes very much from year to year. It is difficult to predict because you can never be quite certain which way parents are going to go. I acknowledge that it is hard. The other services, which I also acknowledge are not the main part of your committee—the respite staff and the post-school options—are a disaster area, as is where they are going to live.

THE CHAIR: Just a follow-up from that question. In terms of the skills that teachers are coming out with, do you think that the increase in diagnosis has also played a part in not keeping pace with the need for that sort of training for teachers in mainstream schools? Do you think that is part of it as well? Is it the general thing where the skills required—whether it is teachers, therapists or whoever—are just not keeping pace with the diagnosis?

Ms von Ess: I would agree with you, Amanda. I do not think it is. I also think that teachers' training is very different now than when I trained in the 1960s. It is probably better in that they learn more theory and they understand more about pedagogy and all of that, but they come out of teachers college—or university, rather—with not many practical classroom skills. That is what you need for autism. You need the practical strategies of what to do and how to do it. I used to be a tutor at the university. Tony Shaddock was over there then and he used to say to me, "This unit is on special education, Gay, not autism." I would say to him, "Yes, and they are going to encounter autism, autism, autism." The teachers would come out from my tutorials and say, "That was great—full of practical ideas." That was probably not what the university wanted, but that was what they got when they employed me.

THE CHAIR: That was a point that the Australian Education Union raised earlier as well. They said that one of the issues was the level of practical experience that teachers get and that often they come out with a degree not having had contact not just with someone with autism but—

Ms von Ess: Just children.

THE CHAIR: Anyone with a disability of any sort.

Ms von Ess: Yes, exactly, because they may have gone through when they were doing their prac teaching. When I qualified, teachers in the ACT were not allowed to teach in special ed until they had done three years mainstream teaching. That was the rule to give you a base, an understanding. Now they stream into the units because that is where the vacancies are.

THE CHAIR: We are actually out of time, but our next witnesses are not here yet. Does anyone have a further question?

MR HANSON: Yes, I do. When you gave your opening statement you said that you were hoping that this was not just another one of these inquiries that writes a lot or something—I cannot remember exactly what you said—but your members look for positive change. Can you express in the two or three minutes what is that positive change you are looking for? What is it?

Ms von Ess: They would like to feel that they are valued in schools—the parents. Some schools work very well with parents, but for a lot there is this barrier: you come in the door, we are the educators, we know about children, goodbye, and don't listen to parents. The parents feel that there is a lot of lip-service a lot of the time. Some schools are brilliant and work well. There are a few schools here that run parent support groups, but with other schools the parents will tell you, "I'd hoped I wouldn't have to battle every year." If that could change. It should be a partnership. I suppose with a lot of children parents do not need to take a very active role in the partnership, but for this group of students it is really important.

THE CHAIR: We are out of time. Thank you, Ms von Ess. That was extremely enlightening.

MR HANSON: It was really good.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for your time in coming to speak to us.

Ms von Ess: Can I just make one statement?

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Ms von Ess: If you have time on Sunday night, *Compass* is doing a program which has Jeanette Purkis, who is a lady with Asperger syndrome who lives in the ACT, and another person, Wendy Lawson. They are running what adulthood looks like. Now, these are two able people, but it will give you a taste.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. The transcript of today's hearing will be sent to you, so you can check that for accuracy.

Ms von Ess: Thank you very much.

BLAKEY, MS LIZ, Deputy Chair, ACT Disability Advisory Council
McKENZIE, MS CAROL ANNE, Member, Disability Advisory Council
ROBINSON, MR TREVOR, Chair, ACT Disability Advisory Council

THE CHAIR: I would like to welcome representatives of the ACT Disability Advisory Council to this hearing into the needs of ACT students with a disability of the Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs. I draw your attention to the privilege statement which is on the table in front of you, just so you are aware of that. Before we go to questions, Mr Robinson or other members, would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr Robinson: Yes, I would love to make an opening statement, please. Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the committee, for providing the Disability Advisory Council the opportunity to provide input into this inquiry into the needs of ACT students with a disability. As the ACT government's foremost advisory conduit on factors that impinge upon the integration, independence and equity of people with disabilities, and their support mechanisms, the Disability Advisory Council has endeavoured in its submission to accurately echo the various viewpoints, opinions and precepts of the education that exists in the community.

While it would be imprudent to suggest that the council's submission addresses every educational belief and tenet that exists within the ACT, council's submission does, without question, authoritatively reflect on an overall sentiment of the disability community towards the needs of students with a disability. You will note that council's written submission exclusively focuses on elements surrounding primary and secondary school education in the ACT. While the literal interpretation of the terms of reference did not exclude vocational, tertiary or other forms of post-secondary education, although their exclusion was inferred, council's expertise centres on matters pertaining to the primary and secondary education streams.

Council's written submission also refrains from discussing elements surrounding children with learning disabilities. While not disputing the acute and demanding needs of a child with a learning disability such as dyscalculia or dyslexia, council employed the definition of "disability" that is present in the ACT Disabilities Services Act 1991, which hitherto is silent on including learning disabilities. Paradoxically, the commonwealth's definition of "disability" as detailed in the Disability Services Act 1992 does include a descriptor for learning disabilities as "a disorder or malfunction that results in the person learning differently from a person without the disorder or malfunction". I will leave this disparity to the lawyers and policy people to sort out.

In developing its submission, council formed a subcommittee of members who are parents of children with disabilities positioned at various stages in the ACT education system. Their personal, and at times frustrating, connection with the ACT education system has imparted a contemporary, pragmatic and truly sincere texture of where education is currently in the ACT and where it should be for children with disabilities.

The subcommittee expounded a variety of views and opinions towards schools, ancillary services—transport, post-school options, therapeutic therapy—and education in general, such as curriculum content and various pedagogical themes. On this last point, it is generally perceived that discussion regarding the education of children with a disability is the sole province of academics, teachers and educationalists, with parents relegated to bit-part roles. This scenario grossly undervalues the parents' involvement and long-term commitment to their child and should be addressed when developing individual learning plans and school curricula.

At this juncture I must impress on the standing committee an unambiguous and unequivocal fact: parents of children with a disability are without a doubt more involved, more committed and have more invested emotionally in every aspect of their child's education and welfare than the overwhelming majority of parents of non-disabled children. Children with disabilities necessitate an incredible investment of time, energy and emotional resources over and above what is needed by a non-disabled child. This exceptional dedication has the effect of generating an unparalleled sense of eternal optimism with honest and realistic pragmatism. Thus, when I mention parents with experience and expertise, I am describing people who have an unparalleled understanding of their child's capabilities, potentials and aspirations.

Before I hand over to the council's deputy chair, Ms Liz Blakey, and subcommittee member, Ms Carol McKenzie, I would like to outline four issues either not covered or only briefly covered by council's written submission. The first is the language used when discussing people with disabilities. On 23 February this year, council sent the minister for disability a letter recommending that the ACT government adopt a people first standard when referring to people with disabilities. To quote from council's letter:

> People First places the person before the disability, describing what a person has, not who a person is. Children who have a disability are children first, with their disability consequential.

In harmony with our people first standard, council also recommended that toilets and parking bays be redesignated as "accessible" rather than "disabled" in order to destigmatise connotations towards disability and disabled. You may be wondering what this has to do with children with disability. Just as many terms associated with disability are no longer or rarely used, such as spastic, cripple and handicapped, the terms "special school" or "special education" also impose similar negativity. To students with a disability, there is nothing special or unusual about the school they attend or the education they receive. Their school or education is no more or less different from an Islamic school or, say, a Rudolph Steiner school—different, yes, but not special. Let us drop the "special" reference, as it allows unnecessary and unwarranted stereotyping.

The second issue focuses on the curriculum. While touched on in council's written submission, it is an area where considerably more customisation and input from parents is needed. As mentioned, parents are acutely aware of their child's capabilities and potential, yet have an almost pedestrian involvement in anything else in their education. As for children at the severe to profound spectrum of disability, rigid adherence to the mainstream curriculum and teaching style is inane in the extreme. The unique abilities of a child with disabilities require an equally unique approach to what is taught and how that is taught. Greater input should be sought from parents and carers, with any input assigned more credibility than it currently receives.

The third issue centres on educational choice. In the main, parents have the ability to shop around for schools that foster and develop their child's—or, more realistically, the parents'—aspirations or talents. Parents can also select schools that reflect traditional, religious and cultural values. And, finally, parents have the opportunity to select their child's school based on pretentious qualities such as gaining perceived social status, exclusivity, the brand name or equity of the school or tacit elitism. Yet choices like these are not available for parents of children with a disability, particularly children with the severe to profound disabilities.

While a portion of non-government schools do cater for children with mild to moderate disabilities, by and large government schools are the default education provider for all students with disabilities. While in no way disparaging the fantastic dedication or skill of teachers in government schools, parents of children with disabilities seek a comparable level of choice to that afforded to mainstream families when selecting their child's school. To that end, non-government schools should be encouraged to either include students with disabilities in the main student body or have purpose-built facilities for students with greater needs. This may seem somewhat of a utopian concept, but it embodies what true inclusion is to many.

The fourth and final issue relates not to education or students' needs but to the quantity and intensity of government inquiry and consultation. Lately, the ACT government, either at parliamentary or department level, has instituted a phenomenal number of inquiries, roundtables, reviews, consultations, discussion papers, working papers, reference groups and forums on a range of topics such as taxis, including wheelchair-accessible taxis, respite care, individual support packages, needs of students with disabilities, mental health and guardianship, motorbike parking on footpaths, and relocation of the Independent Living Centre. The list seems endless and this does not include the federal government's inquiry or consultations on subjects such as parking or changes to the continence assistance scheme et cetera.

While not wanting to talk for other advocacy or special interest disability groups, these agencies are surviving on little more than anorexic government funding and are struggling to stay abreast of this avalanche of well-intentioned, humanist consultation. Although a government body, I would also like to include the Disability Advisory Council in this group. Council responds to only a fraction of what it should, imposing a crude form of policy response triage according to utilitarian criteria.

Unfortunately, the flow of government inquiry affecting the disability sector translates to a considerable shortfall in the quantity and quality of desired information; ergo policy and service delivery benchmarks are predicated on poor, incomplete or biased data which has the flow-on effect of necessitating yet another review in two to four years time. What council would like to see is a better whole of government coordination and cooperation in community engagement activities in the disability sector, particularly to ensure time to incorporate the recommendations of one review before starting another. For many on the community side, there is a distinct and unsettling feeling of deja vu from one review, consultation or inquiry to the next, with little tangible movement in between.

In closing, I hope the standing committee views the merits and virtue of the responses and recommendations of the Disability Advisory Council. Distilled into eight fundamentals, council is resolute that: (1) students with disabilities should continue in school until 20 years old or to years 13 and 14; (2) there should be an increase in the number of learning support assistants and Indigenous education officers; (3) learning support assistants and Indigenous education officers should be upskilled both to alleviate the classroom strain on teachers and to have greater awareness and understanding of disability on the whole; (4) individual learning plans should guide and determine educational outcomes, not fixed department curriculums; (5) parents and carers should have greater involvement in the formulation and delivery of individual learning plans; (6) the transition from school to post school should be more gradual in terms of introduction of employment routines, removal of therapeutic therapy services and the decay of the environmental stimulation; (7) early identification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with learning disabilities and disabilities as a whole; and (8) comparable and compatible placement of students with disabilities. By that, we mean grouping those with mild and moderate disabilities together and those with probably severe and profound disabilities together, although this is not clear.

Madam Chair, I thank you for your patience and forbearance. I shall now hand you over to Liz Blakey and Carol McKenzie to answer questions and further expand council’s submission.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you, Mr Robinson.

Ms Blakey: We are happy just to take questions, thank you.

THE CHAIR: The first question I have is about the individual learning plans. You referred to the recommendation, Mr Robinson, in your opening statement about having them at least once each term with parents. When the department came in, they said they were looking at reviewing the ILP process. The suggestion has been made by Professor Shaddock about having the SCAN process tied more to the ILP process as well, so that you are looking more at those outcomes. From your work, what feedback have you had from parents in general about the ILP process and how it is working?

Ms Blakey: I can also speak as a parent; I have a son who is almost 16 and who has autism, so I have been through the process and I could recite many ILP meetings. In general—and I have had a lot of conversations with other parents—the individual learning plan process is quite enormous, in looking at your child’s abilities. Most of the time they look at deficits, which is quite difficult, and the same is the case with the SCAN process, when that came in. I used to be with Advocacy for Inclusion, or Advocacy ACTion as it was at the time. I have also gone through that process. I actually went through the SCAN development process when it was first brought in.

One of the biggest issues with the SCAN is that you do have to look at the child’s deficits. So parents look at positive influences in the child’s life and at what the child can do; what the SCAN process looks at is what they cannot do. So for a parent who is trying to look at the positives, what happens quite often is that you hear stories about parents who have actually walked out in tears because they felt all they talked about was what their child cannot do. That, in itself, is a difficult process.

With the individual learning plans, it depends on the teacher's ability to write and develop the plan. It also depends on the school's ability. It still can be quite flexible, even though the department reviewed the individual learning plan process a couple of years ago—from memory, in 2002 or 2004. They did review their process, which gave a bit more uniformity, instead of going to each different school and each different teacher and it would be a slightly different process.

In saying that, sometimes you have a really well-developed learning plan, and that is what we hear from a lot of parents: "I've got this great plan." But when you get it into the classroom, it does not actually happen, or you get to your review, because most times in term 3 there is a review of your individual learning plan. So you sit down and say: "Okay, with Johnny, we've got this, this and this. So how are we going?" "Well, we actually didn't get a chance to do that," or "Within the classroom it was a bit difficult to do this," or "We're developing something else." Or you will find three or four years down the track that we are still pulling out exactly the same ILP that we had written three or four years ago and we have not reached that area.

In general, the individual learning plans are a good idea but if they are not acted on and developed, and the child is not developed with that plan, they are not worth the paper they are written on. That was one of the issues prior to the review before—people would have this great plan but it did not actually develop the child, or, as Trevor put it, it would be looking at the curriculum and how it would change the curriculum, but it actually should be on the actual individual student's ability—what they need and what level they are at. Of course, we are looking at children that need mild modification to a curriculum and at children whose individual learning plan may only be on the necessities in life—their living skills. So there is quite a diversity between the two.

Ms McKenzie: With respect to having really good plans, I think that a lot does come down to the teachers and how much they can actually put into getting the children to accomplish the goals set down. From my personal experience with my son, with the two teachers that he has this year—and he had them last year—and the ILP goals, you can see that they are similar goals but you can see where they are being built upon, because he has gone from using board maker symbols and soon he will be getting a voice communicator. They are working on building on the goals. So instead of making new ILPs each year, it is important to build on what the child is already learning and achieving, and then they can move on to the next stage. I think that is another important thing.

THE CHAIR: So a crucial factor in that is also the teacher and how that is progressed—

Ms McKenzie: Yes.

THE CHAIR: in the actual classroom.

Ms Blakey: And their level of experience. My son has autism, and I know you heard a lot from Gay. Sometimes you get this idea that just because a child has autism they need to learn this, this and this. But each child is completely different; hence we keep it going as an individual learning plan. But that individuality sometimes does not come across or someone is saying, “By this age, this child needs to have learned this.” Some children with autism may be really good at maths but their English comprehension is not very good, and then they have another ability in another way. So you have to try and look at that ability and at what actually suits them.

MR HANSON: I might give a preamble here so that you can understand what I am getting at. What I have learned over the course of this inquiry so far is that the individual teacher makes an enormous difference. It is probably the biggest thing—including parents, perhaps—certainly in the education forum, and the LSAs are a component of that as well. But those teachers are often under-trained, under-skilled, under-equipped, under-resourced and do not have the support mechanisms. So what is happening is that mainstream education does not really provide an optimal setting for many children with a disability.

Children with autism—and we heard Gay expressing that—do not have the support that they need in mainstream education and it is difficult to see, short of pumping in a whole heap of extra resources or doubling the time that teachers have available for education, how that is going to change in the short term. The other option then, I suppose, is what is termed special education. Of course, you expressed that there is a stigma around that, because it is special rather than specialist. And that is a term that we have heard today as an alternative, but there could be others.

It seems that in recent times there has been a push away from what we term “special education” towards mainstream, believing that that would be more inclusive for children, but the problem is that it just does not work because it is either under-resourced or it is a little bit utopian in its view. Children with autism need a different way of learning or understanding; and teachers are not necessarily prepared to teach someone with profound deafness. So it just does not seem to be practically working. Although from a philosophical point of view of wanting to include children in mainstream it makes sense, the practical application is not working on the ground.

I would like your views on that—whether we have gone too far in terms of trying to put kids into mainstream. Do we need to perhaps take a step back and focus more on specialist education for children? I am interested in your views on where the solution lies.

Ms Blakey: I am personally an inclusionist; I believe in inclusion. With a group of parents, I actually lobbied for the first autism unit to be opened at Latham primary school. Then, after about the first year, I spent the next three years advocating for my son to be taken out of the autism unit because it did not suit him and his individual needs. So I can understand, as a parent of a child with autism, and I understand where Gay and the autism association are coming from. I can understand that each child has individual needs. My concern about segregating children with autism is that eventually they do have to come back into the world. I agree that sometimes that individual learning does need to be in a segregated setting, but I think that if we pull children out, eventually they have to come back out into the community.

I personally have learnt about this. My son got himself out of the autism unit because there was an issue within the classroom. The principal said, “So, Daniel, what are you going to do?” He said, “I don’t want to go to that classroom.” She said, “Well, what do you want?” He said, “I want a new classroom.” She looked at me and said, “Well, I can’t do that.” I said: “Well, you asked, he gave you the answer. He wants another classroom.” As it turned out, he ended up in a year 4-5 classroom with mainstream students, well placed with a teacher, well placed with students who worked through with him, and he has been in mainstream ever since.

He is now seen out in the community. He will go to the shops. At shopping centres, people say hello to him; the boys high-five him. He comes home with some very challenging teenage behaviours as well—swearing and the things that you do not want your child to learn. But that is normal behaviour of most 15 or 16-year-old boys. So he has learnt that behaviour. If he was in the segregated setting which he had been in previously, he could mimic. He had learnt how other children with autism could squeal—the noise up and down. He had about five different personalities. I would say “That’s not you; that’s such and such.”

I think it depends on the individual child; it is about choice, and the submission of the Disability Advisory Council is about choice. I personally believe that if we go back to segregated settings we are just setting ourselves back again. So it is about that individual need. I agree there is not enough support, not enough education and understanding of our children with autism. I think that came out in Trevor’s statement. I am not sure whether going back to that would actually work. But you have to look at individual choice for individual children.

Unfortunately—which is something we have also put in our submission—a lot of children have gone into mainstream that are now going back to segregated settings. I think that the department need to look at that, and that is what we have put in our submission. We need to look at why children are going back. I know that a lot of experience is that it is because they are not appropriately supported—there will only be one learning support teacher assistant within the classroom when there should be two or three. With resourcing, it would be better to be able to resource a classroom better, so that the student is in the mainstream, because eventually they are going to go off to work. We do not have separate work. Thank goodness, we are shutting down sheltered workshops. The world is still out there and people have to be included in the way that society is. That is what inclusion is. The federal government is big on social inclusion, and that is where we need to go. I think we are stepping back into the past if we do segregate.

Mr Robinson: To balance that between Liz and I, I take an opposing view, but not diametrically opposed. My son is 25 years old and has an intellectual disability, the cognitive age of about a five-year-old, and has somewhat challenging aggressive behaviour. When we were living in Western Australia, he was included in a high school where there was scant playground supervision, and he was assaulted by several students in that high school. So if we want to include students to the nth degree then they will also have to experience the same level of bullying and so forth, and they are going to be very targeted in the school environment. Total inclusion, as in the rest of the mainstream student body, will never occur. I also found that while inclusion at a primary school level was okay, at a secondary school level, because the student body is so different and it can be quite aggressive—bullying et cetera—it is probably less appropriate than it is in a primary school situation.

MR HANSON: Where do you sit, Carol?

Ms McKenzie: My son has mild autism but he has cerebral palsy and he has very high needs and complex behaviours—head bangs and hand bites. He needs full support to do everything—feeding, and he cannot really be without supervision. I did actually want him to be put into a mainstream school when it was time for him to be placed in school, but I was discouraged from placing him into a mainstream school by counsellors. To be in a mainstream school he would need a support person there—

MR HANSON: Constantly.

Ms McKenzie: Yes, continually. He would not be able to be left alone. If he is, and he starts doing all of these behaviours, he does a lot of self-harming, bangs his head and bites his hands. A lot of people do not understand. A lot of kids might freak out a bit because they do not understand. So he has been at special schools from the word go, pretty much.

Ms Blakey: It goes back to that level of support, too, and the difference. Your son, Jason, does like to go out in the community, and that is about community understanding, attitude and acceptance. I agree with Trevor about the bullying. I guess you could say that is inclusion; a child without a disability can get bullied because they are wearing different pants. So it is about that weigh-up. It is a hard call, and I guess that is where our submission comes in. Each child is different. You look at the individual needs of the child and address the educational needs of those children. It is not a matter of saying, “Just because you have this type of disability, you have to go here,” because there are children with extreme cerebral palsy—

MR HANSON: We are clearly not going to resolve this debate, which is probably an ongoing one, anyway. Would you agree that what is clear is that for mainstream we need to up the skills—

Mr Robinson: Certainly.

MR HANSON: and resources for the teacher?

Ms Blakey: Yes.

MR HANSON: And in special, we need to get away from special to make it less stigmatised?

Ms Blakey: Yes.

MR HANSON: If we can do those two things then we can keep having the debate but that will assist it?

Mr Robinson: Yes.

Ms Blakey: Especially the skill level. With things changing—and I am sure Gay would have said this about autism, for example—it is about having the teachers trained, it is about attitude and it is about their ability. Sometimes it does not work because of a conflict between a teacher and a child's personality, for example, which is no different from a mainstream child; sometimes they will work better in one setting than in another. Certainly, there is a lack of training and support for teachers. If there was better support for teachers and better assistance, and better understanding on the part of the students that do not have a disability, I think there would be a lot more success stories for children with a disability being included in the school.

Ms McKenzie: I was going to make a suggestion. Maybe when a teacher does their degree, they should all have to do a general subject encompassing disabilities and different—

MR HANSON: I think that is a good point, Carol. Maybe what the committee can do is write to the local universities and ask them what element of training they do for disabilities in their curriculum and find out what that is. That would be interesting for us, I think.

Ms Blakey: Speaking from my own personal experience, I have done a community education/community advocacy degree. A lot of the other students were actually teachers. So it was interesting from the point of view of having a child with a disability. They would say, "I'm not doing special." That would have been my opening statement; you go to your first class and say who you are. I said: "For you teachers that think you're never going to do special, I hate to tell you but there's always going to be a child with a disability or somebody different within your class. So if you think that you're going into teaching to only teach so-called 'normal' children, well good luck." My understanding is that they do a component, but it would be interesting to see what that level of—

MR HANSON: Yes, to find out how extensive it is and if it has got a practical aspect, because certainly something we have found is that there is the theory, which is all well and good, but in dealing with a kid with autism, you need some practical skills in how to deal in the classroom too.

Ms Blakey: That is right.

MS PORTER: I was listening to you talk about the issue of inclusivity or of having a child go to a specialist school, and the issue around language that you brought up before, Mr Robinson, and the issue of bullying within the school environment. I am not quite sure where I am going with all of this but I guess the other side of the coin is this: should there not be an environment in the school where the bullying is addressed in any case, be it for any young person? Do you think that is to do with the particular culture of the school that comes down from the leadership—say, the principal—and how he or she encourages the education of people about what the real world is, which includes people with various abilities, which is again about language rather than disabilities, and also about how we all live together? As you rightly said, Ms Blakey, when any person leaves school, they go out into another world, which includes different behaviours by different people. So we all need to be able to learn to get on with one another and accept one another. Do you want to make any comments about that?

Mr Robinson: The principal, without question, sets the tone for the school with regard to behaviour, with regard to how everyone within that school environment is seen, and with regard to expectations of behaviour. It is almost social engineering that occurs within the school. If there is a strong theme of accepting everyone as an individual, the rights of everyone to have space, that all basically trickles down from the principal. From my experience, principals are the ones that set the tone. So they would probably be the first port of call for a lot of awareness education with regard to disabilities and acceptance, because schools are a microcosm of the larger environment.

It is more difficult in a secondary school setting because you have such a diverse student body and different ages. A 12-year-old is probably a much more malleable individual than someone who is 16 or 17 who is somewhat dysfunctional. I believe that, in a primary school situation at least, to set the tone for the rest of the school, and the school career for the student, the principal needs to be very strongly educated in the awareness of disability, of acceptance, of good community philosophies et cetera.

Ms Blakey: I strongly agree. What I have noticed throughout the years with my son is that the more difference there is, the more accepting children are of difference. I have watched from kindergarten up to year 10; my son is in year 10. I went in with him the other day to Subway and he ordered his own food, which is very rigid, “I want blah, blah, blah.” He hates me saying “blah, blah” at the moment, so I apologise for that. The man behind the counter looked and I said, “Daniel has autism.” He said, “Yes, we had those kids at school and they did whatever; fine.”

I did not like the way he put it, but basically my son was no different from any other customer that came in the door, even though he was wearing headphones and he looks a bit different. I thought that was good because that was something that this child had grown up with. This boy would have been 18 or 19, and it would not have mattered whether he was pink, white, black or whatever, and walked through the door and had three heads or two heads; he was still someone that he served and understood because he had noticed it and it was no different. I thought that was interesting. It is about the culture and about the principal. And I agree that it is about the leadership throughout.

A good example is Daniel’s English teacher. She now says, when Daniel leaves the room: “Right, this is how it goes. This is what’s going to happen. Yes, he may do such and such but your behaviour makes the difference as to how the classroom goes as well.” So she has actually put the onus back on the students to work out and monitor their own behaviour and what they do within the classroom which makes the world a different place to live in. I thought that was interesting because she is looking at each person within her society, within the classroom, as being responsible for how each individual person, whether they have a disability or not, actually works out in the world. I thought that was an interesting way that she put it. She said, “As far as I’m concerned he’s no different to anyone else and we all have to regulate our own behaviour within the classroom.”

Ms McKenzie: I have not had that experience because Jason has always been in the special school settings. But with his brother in mainstream schools, I know that he got bullied a lot, and that was because he was overweight. I did find that he was able to bring friends home when Jason was at home. He did not feel that he could not bring people home from school to hang out and play games and stuff while his little brother was there. So the kids that have been Philip's friends since primary school have grown up knowing about Jason and having that interaction. When they are there and Jason is there, they see Jason do all of his bits and pieces. I think it is educating the kids so that disability is normal family life. Do you understand what I mean?

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Ms McKenzie: I have been told that a lot of kids do not like bringing friends home because of their brother or sister, and I feel that Philip has always been able to bring friends home.

Mr Robinson: It also extends beyond just the people. It extends to the built environment as well. If they see at the school that there are ramps then that is accepted as the norm. If they see accessible toilets, that is the norm. In other words, it normalises what disability is, and it is not special. We do not have to put in a ramp because of Joe Blow or little Mary, or we do not have to put in an accessible toilet because of one of the disabled kids. It is there because it is the norm. So we normalise everything once again in the built environment.

If a kid from a normal mainstream school goes somewhere, they will expect that there is a ramp there; they will expect that there is an accessible toilet there. It is not necessarily because someone with a disability will be beating the door down and saying, "Look, please could you put in a ramp," or "Look, could you please put in an accessible toilet." It is the norm. That is why, once again going back to the previous question about inclusion, the greater the percentage of kids with a disability that we can put into the normal school environment—and these words are terrible words and they do not sit comfortably—the more we normalise disability and it becomes just Fred, Mary et cetera. And that is just the way they get around—they need a ramp.

People accept that we do not use the accessible toilet because they are for people that actually need it. I do not go there to have a shower or to change my baby's nappy or anything like that. That is one of the greatest things I have problems with: people who are using the accessible toilets are generally not the people who should be using them. So we normalise the environment, built or otherwise.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. We are almost out of time. Mr Doszpot, you have not asked a question so we will go to you.

MR DOSZPOT: Thank you, I appreciate that. I have a tonne of questions I want to ask you but I will cut right to the chase. I compliment you on your very concise opening statement. I think that covered a lot of the areas that are of concern to all of us. You specifically mentioned the fact that you had written to a department—I do not know which department you had written to; Disability, I presume—regarding the school leaving age for students with a disability.

Mr Robinson: No, in our submission I think there was—

Ms Blakey: Yes, we talked about—

Mr Robinson: We talked about year 13 and 14, or going to 20, yes.

MR DOSZPOT: You are aware, I presume, that the age has been dropped from 20 to 18?

Ms Blakey: Yes.

MR DOSZPOT: As the ACT Disability Advisory Council, has anyone consulted you on the impact that it would have on the disability community?

Ms Blakey: We have not actually, and we only found out as a council—and even as a parent of a child with a disability, I was unaware of it until the decision was made. What we found, especially with children in the so-called special schools, is that they usually did stay until 20 years of age—year 13. The other thing that has come out is that, because there are so many children that are now in mainstream schools and included, once they leave, once they turn 18, a lot of the time they do not have anywhere to go. So as hard as it may be to have that extra year for some of the students, it is better than going home and being without a job, without extra training, without any post-school options.

We were saying in the submission that they should either have somewhere to go, have further education, have further training or have a job to go to; otherwise they should not leave school, because they do not do well in the community if they do not have somewhere to be included. And nor do children who do not have a disability—if they leave and do not have a job, a lot of times they do not end up in the best place.

It is also about the level of care needed. Sometimes parents, once their child finishes school, have to leave work for that 12 months or two years, or whatever it may be, until that child with a disability gets somewhere else to go.

MR DOSZPOT: These are the points that we have heard from umpteen people this afternoon and in previous committee hearings that I have been involved with. What I am trying to get to in a fairly strong way is that you have mentioned how counterproductive it is to have meeting after meeting, review after review, with nothing done about it. As council members, you are asked to provide advice on matters to do with ACT disability. We have also heard from a special education reference group, and I asked them the same question. They have not been officially told that the age group has changed. So the question I am asking is: are you satisfied with the advice that is being sought from you? You are not being given an opportunity, I presume, to have input prior to a decision being taken. Are you comfortable with that?

Mr Robinson: No. Basically, as mentioned, there are so many reviews and the Disability Advisory Council has only scratched the surface in our submission. There are many cases where something slips through and we hear it second-hand on the grapevine. By and large, if that were to have come to council for its opinion, we would have said categorically, “No, we don’t support the lowering of the age from the current status of 20.” Without question, with respect to all parents of children with a disability, although the children of most of the parents on the council are below 18 or 20, so they have not been affected yet, I have, and I would say that it is a negative move, a bad move, to lower the age.

MR DOSZPOT: Time has run out. There are quite a few questions that I might take up by different means. Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: We are, unfortunately, out of time. Thank you, Mr Robinson, Ms Blakey and Ms McKenzie for addressing the committee today. A copy of the transcript of today's hearing will be sent to you so that you can check it for accuracy. Thank you for your time.

The committee adjourned at 5.04 pm.