

family

A D V O C A C Y

Response to NSW Department of Education Inclusion Action Plan 2016- 2020

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About Family Advocacy

Family Advocacy is a state and federally funded disability advocacy organisation in New South Wales (NSW). The organisation was founded by families of people with disability. Our goal is to advance and protect the right of people with developmental disability to achieve meaningful lives and enjoy the same opportunities and living conditions as the majority of Australians. The organisation has a high presence and profile:

- building the capacity of families to undertake an advocacy role;
- auspicing a successful ongoing capacity building project, called Resourcing Families;
- developing leadership skills in families;
- making representations to Government regarding legislation, policy, funding, monitoring and practice and the extent to which they reflect the needs of people with developmental disability;
- and providing advocacy related information, support and advice.

Family Advocacy performs a combination of family and systemic advocacy in NSW. “Family advocacy is an independent, community-based model that usually involves family members acting on behalf of a son or daughter or sibling” (Weafer, 2003, p.39), and “systems advocacy lobbies for reform and change of social systems and structures that discriminate against, abuse and neglect people with disabilities” (Seymour and Peter, 2004, p.12). Advocacy is a cornerstone in the lives of people with disability and those that love and support them, ensuring that their rights are protected and they have natural safeguards.

Family Advocacy helps families to advocate on behalf of their child for a good life with the things most of us would expect in Australia: education in a regular classroom at a local school, a place in the community amongst friends and family, and the supports, informal and paid, necessary to make that happen.

Case study

A mum may call Family Advocacy because she is facing difficulty at her son or daughter’s school when asking the classroom teacher to make reasonable adjustments to the curriculum for her child with disability. Adjustments are needed so that he or she can continue to be included in the regular class at the local school. Family Advocacy staff would work through her concerns; provide her with information about relevant policies; support her to be assertive in asking for her child to be included, and to look for a mutually workable solution in dialogue with the school.

Introduction

As Family Advocacy has a particular focus on inclusive education, we have restricted our comments to the parts of the plan related to inclusion of children and young people with disabilities at school and in transition to employment or further study.

Guiding Principles

Family Advocacy acknowledges the Department of Education (DoE) for their commitment to ongoing engagement with people with disability and their families. While we commend the DoE for initial in-person consultations with People with Disability Australia and other groups, we would suggest that consulting an advocacy organisation with a particular focus on education such as Family Advocacy would be productive.

Focus Area 1: Developing positive community attitudes and behaviours

1.2 Increased employee awareness and acceptance of the rights of people with disability, and improved inclusive practices.

Family Advocacy is pleased to see a focus on employee awareness. While we acknowledge that this is something which can only change over time, members of Family Advocacy are very aware that the attitude of Department of Education (DoE) staff is paramount to their children's success at school. Unfortunately parents still experience negative attitudes about inclusion from staff of DoE and this can have a profound impact on children with disability. For example, a parent member of Family Advocacy, who has a close relationship with her community and her son's school, and who would be considered an example of successful inclusion, wrote recently: "No person with a disability has a 'voice' when things go wrong and what is more upsetting is that behaviour from a teacher that is accepted as okay for a person with a disability would not be accepted as okay for a student without a disability. There was no apparent thought about the dignity and respect that had not been shown to our son (in the complaints process)". We recommend ongoing training for staff regarding the human rights and dignity of people with disability.

1.5 Increased employee awareness and improved inclusive practices.

We commend the DoE on recent development of online learning resources regarding the Education Standards for students with disability, and recommend that uptake of this training be mandatory for new staff, and that continual training be mandated.

Focus Area 2: Creating liveable communities

2.3 Provide school communities with information and support for students with disability.

Our experience is that most parents have a limited understanding of their rights regarding their children with disability, though they may have a sense that their child has a right to an education. We suggest that parents of students with disability are given a fact sheet on the Standards, whenever the child's disability is identified. This may happen at various points in the process, including but not limited to enrolment, when adjustments are made by a class room teacher, at an Individual Learning Plan (ILP) meeting or follow up.

Focus Area 3: Supporting access to meaningful employment

3.2 Increased opportunities for people with disability to enter the workforce

Research shows that inclusion at school is more likely to lead to inclusion in the workplace. Thus we suggest that more inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular class would lead to better outcomes in this area.

3.6 School students with significant disability are supported to plan for transition to post school pathways for employment, further education, training and support.

As the Department of Education (DoE) is no doubt aware, students with significant disabilities will often need high levels of support to be engaged in ordinary transition programs such as work experience. Unfortunately this is not always the case on the ground. One parent has stated:

I contacted the Department that looked after Work Experience and the person I spoke to questioned why our son would need to practice to be successful at his placement at the end of the year. She clearly had no idea that a person with a disability would need that sort of help to be successful and gain the skills needed to be able to contribute to the workplaces. Meaningful work experience is so important to the person with a disability because they gain a skill set that will help them in open employment when they leave school.

We recommend training in this area for all staff involved in delivering regular transition programs, whether this is facilitating university or TAFE open days, work experience, or practicum units of vocationally focused subjects.

Focus Area 4: Improving access to mainstream services through better systems and processes

Overall we would like to note that while this section's title suggests access to mainstream services will be improved, there is no mention in the plan of improving access to the regular class for children with disability. While we understand the reticence around this issue based on parent and student choice, we also know that children have better outcomes in the regular class. In addition, the principle of inclusive education was adopted at the Salamanca World Conference (UNESCO 1994) where inclusive education was viewed as a human rights issue and as a means of bringing about personal development and building relationships among individuals, groups and nations. This was stated in Article 2:

Regular schools with an inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discrimination, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all.

Therefore we recommend that the Department of Education (DoE) develop targets for reducing the number of children in specialist support provision schools and support units.

While the definitions of 'inclusion' and 'mainstream' may be contested, to Family Advocacy, inclusion is:

- a commitment to creating environments in which all students feel welcomed, accepted and honoured for who they are
- the belief that everyone benefits from knowing, interacting with and learning from a wide range of other individuals
- the understanding that we are ALL different - and ALL the same. We are all human beings that seek connections, affection, and opportunities to learn and grow and belong. And we all have different strengths, challenges, and needs for support
- the recognition that if we want to make a better world for everyone we all need to learn to be comfortable, skilled and enthusiastic interacting with a wide range of people.

A parent, Lyn, says:

For me inclusion is about Hannah fully participating – not doing something else. Last term the school musical took place. This followed 3 terms of rehearsals and preparation. The kids involved would stay back every Monday until 7 and order pizza. It was wonderful for Hannah to have the opportunity to be part of that – to meet kids from other grades with the same interest and to share in the experience. There was a real bond between the kids by the time the musical took place. Kids still stop and talk to Hannah.

She did not have a stand out part but she was part of it. There was no expectation that the family would stay. She was just allowed to be part of the group. It was inclusion at its best – a real opportunity to be part of the gang. Other parents also saw her there as just one of the kids. Often, parents are the ones you need to win over as parents' attitudes rub off on kids.

Family Advocacy also notes that enrolments in schools for specific purposes in NSW have increased from 5194 students in 2010 to 5998 in 2014, according to Department of Education and Communities (DEC) data. While data on support unit enrolments is not available, in 2012 there were more than 1500 support classes in regular schools. As a mum associated with Family Advocacy has said, in her small local area the number of support units has increased from zero to three (that she is aware of) in two years. Inevitably, the presence of support units puts pressure on parents (and educators) to further isolate already vulnerable children.

Academic research tells us that the results for students with disabilities are better in regular classrooms, and moreover, that students without disabilities also benefit from inclusive practices. In a comprehensive review of the Australian and international literature, Jackson (2008) found no evidence of improved academic or social outcomes for students with disability in special schools when compared with those in the regular class. There was significant evidence of worse outcomes for those in segregated environments. Jackson also addressed the commonly mentioned concern about the time taken away from other children due to the presence of a child or children with disability. The vast majority of studies reviewed in Jackson (2008) found neutral or positive impact on children without disabilities. This of course is not to dismiss the impact of one child's difficult behaviour; however, we would suggest that behaviour is a matter of classroom management.

Family Advocacy recommends that:

Recommendations

1. That the Department of Education (DoE) provide ongoing, mandatory training for staff regarding the human rights and dignity of all children, including people with disability.
2. That completion of training on the Disability Standards for Education be mandatory for new staff, and that update training be mandated.
3. That parents of children with disability be given a fact sheet on the Disability Standards for Education, whenever the child's disability is identified. This may happen at various points in the process, including but not limited to enrolment, when adjustments are made by a class room teacher, at an Individual Learning Plan meeting or follow up.
4. That training be provided on adjusting and supporting students and young people with disabilities for all staff involved in delivering regular transition programs, whether this is facilitating university or TAFE open days, work experience, or practicum units of vocationally focused subjects.

5. That the DoE develop targets for reducing the number of students in specialist support provision schools and support units.