

Hundreds of submissions to the Senate inquiry into the education of students with disabilities have made it very clear where the chronic funding shortfalls lie.

BY MARGARET PATON

# Gazing into the disability gap



**Theresa Duncombe and her son Ben have lobbied the federal government on access to education for children with disabilities.**

disability, and that 88.2 per cent of these needed some form of adjustment at school. This is far in excess of the 5.3 per cent currently receiving funded support.

It's no wonder principals say that current funding is inadequate and making it tough for schools to meet the needs of students with disability, despite the best efforts of educators.

Brendan Millar, principal of Footscray West Primary School in Melbourne, says he is concerned about students falling through the gaps in the system.

"In particular, the need to support students with autism is much greater than it used to be," he says.

"It takes an incredible amount of time for staff to put in a submission, which comes from a serious concern about a child and their ability to learn. The submission's not accepted in time because they've been asked to add information. It's an ongoing challenge."

His school's experienced leadership team has learnt to work around limited budgets, but that hasn't diminished its concern, says Miller.

At Lucindale Area School in South Australia, principal Adrian Maywald says the goodwill and expertise of teachers, staff and the local community regarding students with disabilities is "incredible". But his school has to dip into its regular resources for those who don't fit into the bottom fifth percentile that's funded, such as those with behavioural, social-emotional or intellectual issues.

**W**hen the AEU surveyed principals across Australia for its *State of Our Schools* report this year, more than four out of five (84 per cent) respondents said they didn't have enough funding for students with disabilities. They said they had taken funding from other areas of their school budgets to compensate. Principals called for more classroom assistance, specialist support and professional development for teachers.

Not surprisingly, these requests mirror concerns in the 254 submissions lodged with the Senate inquiry into the education of students with disabilities.

## BRIEFLY



**There is no extra funding for over 100,000 school students with disabilities.**

**A Senate inquiry, due to report on 3 November, has received more than 200 submissions on the subject.**

**Under-resourcing and funding submission difficulties contribute to teacher stress and burnout.**

A 2012 Australian Bureau of Statistics survey found that 190,000 students with disabilities had received extra education funding, but there had been no support or special arrangements at schools for another 133,000.

The full extent of underfunding will be updated and clarified when the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) is finalised before the end of the year. The federal government has promised to use this data to deliver increases in funding for students with disability from 2016, but there are still no details as to how this is to be achieved.

Preliminary data from the 2013 NCCD shows that 13.1 per cent of students have some form of

## Eventually you'll have burnt-out staff, particularly in country regions.



**Adrian Maywald**  
Principal of Lucindale  
Area School



Lucindale Area  
School principal,  
Adrian Maywald

"Often we're told we can't expect any funds or resources, but they will give recommendations and strategies, which we need to resource ourselves," he says.

His school's partnership location is spread over a 250km radius with support services 300km away at Murray Bridge. This often means that, when he completes referrals for support services, there is no-one to provide them in a timely manner. He has suggested a more flexible approach so the funds become available in cash form.

He also advocates video conferencing for professional development, to save funds for training teachers offsite.

The whole disability funding situation means teachers "miss out" in terms of their life balance and wellbeing, and it's not sustainable, he says. "Eventually you'll have burnt-out staff, particularly in country regions, as well as students who aren't achieving their full potential due to support processes being ineffective."

### Stress and burnout

An increase in staff burnout, staff turnover and stress-related issues due to under-resourcing were cited by Aspley East State School in a submission. It has one of the largest special education programs in mainstream Brisbane primary schools, with about 60 of its 800 students having a recognised disability.

Leanne Smith, the school's head of support services, cautions against funding alone being seen as the answer.

"There needs to be a structural change in the school system [to boost] professional development," she says. "There's no funded time off for teachers in Queensland to do a

special education degree. Anyway, in the modern classroom, teachers are so emotionally and physically tired, there's no time or energy left to study."

In the *State of Our Schools* survey, almost two-thirds of teachers said their training hadn't fully equipped them to teach students with disabilities. Smith says it's very difficult for teachers to implement individual curriculum plans for such students without support.

"It's not unusual for a teacher to be responsible for at least two to five individual curriculum plans in addition to teaching the mainstream curriculum to the class."

Despite teaching staff at Aspley East State School having done extensive professional development and research in inclusive education, challenges remain. "We don't have the staffing resources to implement high-impact best practices, such as co-teaching, to any significant degree. Nor do we have sufficient funding to provide the level of high-quality professional development recommended to us by [internationally recognised special education consultant] Dr Loretta Giorcelli."

### Compulsory unit

AEU federal president Correna Haythorpe says chronic underfunding

of disability education is a growing issue for schools despite numerous reports on it in recent decades.

"Students with disabilities can participate in schools and get great results with in-class support, equipment and individual learning plans. All these things require funding."

All teaching courses should have at least one compulsory unit on disability education and graduate teachers should have access to a disability education expert in their first two years of work, she says. Ongoing professional development in disability education for more experienced teachers is also crucial.

The AEU has urged state and federal governments to commit to the full six years of Gonski funding, including the overdue provision of the full disability loading. With that commitment, there'd be extra funding for those 133,000 students with disabilities.

"The federal government promised at the 2013 election that they would extent disability funding to all students who needed it by the 2015 school year," Haythorpe said.

"This promise has still not been delivered, and there is no funding set aside in the Budget for the 2016 school year. It should be a top priority for new Education Minister Simon Birmingham to provide full support to all students with disability who need it."

"Gonski was an incredibly brave paper to write," says Footscray West principal Millar. "It shows public education outperforming private schools by 10 per cent academically... It would be nice to see the recommendations followed up." ●

**Margaret Paton is a freelance writer and casual primary school teacher.**