

the case for a **better deal** for students with **disability**

On 25 August 2009 the Federal Coalition held a major stakeholder forum in Melbourne to discuss the significant challenges faced by students with disabilities and their families. “Equal Access to Education: Choice for Parents of Students with Disability” was attended by the Opposition Leader, the Hon Malcolm Turnbull MP, Shadow Minister for Education, Training and Apprenticeships, the Hon Christopher Pyne MP and Senator for Victoria, Senator Mitch Fifield as well as other stakeholder groups, school heads and parents.

The following is an extract from the address by Bill Daniels, ISCA Executive Director to the forum.

I intend to state the case for a better deal for students with disability in the independent schools sector pretty bluntly but do not intend to offend anyone. The case for better support is clear and it's high time something serious was done about it.

Let's just assume that 1992 was the starting point – the year in which the *Disability Discrimination Act* was passed by the Federal Parliament. It was watershed legislation, long overdue. It provided rights for people with disability, including school students. Parents have rejoiced and exercised their rights, including a greater choice of schools.

When the Act was passed, there were 2,000 students with disability being educated in independent schools. There are now more than 10,000 such students. You will find them in most of the 1,100 independent schools that offer high quality education to students of all abilities, from all sections of society, across all states and territories. They are among the half a million students

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who attend independent schools. Most of them are enrolled in mainstream schools but many of them attend one of the 55 special schools operating in the independent sector.

However, most of the parents of these students who exercise the choice given to them under the Act are faced with some pretty tough decisions.

First, they have to pay substantial school fees because governments meet only some of the costs of educating children in these schools – and depending on the school, only a small fraction of the costs.

Secondly, most of these children will not enjoy the same level of support offered to their friends who attend government schools at little or no cost to their parents.

And thirdly, most of them will be denied access to other state government support services, simply because of the ownership of the school they attend.

This is an unacceptable state of affairs in this country. Where is the 'Fair Go' in that?

Establishing equitable funding arrangements for students with disability remains an issue that has universal support from within the independent schools sector.

There is no argument about the willingness to educate these students in this sector.

The independent sector believes that parental choice of schools must be maintained for these students, just as it is for other students.



Regrettably, no government has been prepared to face the problem that for independent schools, the rights established under the *Disability Discrimination Act* to access choice of schools are not adequately supported by governments with commensurate funding.

ISCA believes that students with disability represent a special case in government funding arrangements for schooling.

Why should a child with disability be penalised if the parents decide to enrol the child in a non-government school?

Our proposition is simple – support for these students should be based on the level of funding required to allow them to achieve their educational goals.

Yes, it can be expensive. There is a plethora of research available that demonstrates that the costs incurred can be many times the cost of educating his or her friends. The recently released Monash University study confirms this. To provide appropriate services for many students requires a commitment to allocate the financial, human and professional services that are way above the current levels of government support.

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Further evidence is provided in the National Disability Strategy Consultation Report *SHUT OUT*, recently released by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

It reports that *"Most submissions said that there is a pressing need to provide more extensive resources to ensure the learning needs of children with disabilities are met. Many submissions passionately argued that a lack of adequate funding in mainstream schools forces parents to seek alternatives."*

Surely, given the weight of evidence, we have reached a point where we should no longer have to argue a case that the resources are inadequate.

There are sound reasons why resources should be based on the individual needs of students. We do not argue that any sector should receive less support. However, it seems to be incongruous that a student who moves from a government school to a non-government school automatically loses access to government funded services. The *SHUT OUT* Report notes that:

"Many submissions argued that the inflexibility and lack of portability of funding has narrowed their choices. Many parents said, for example, that the lack of assistance and support in independent and faith-based settings has constrained their ability to choose these school settings for their children."

ISCA encourages political parties to address the funding issue in a way that provides support for students on the basis of individual need rather than on the ownership of the school the child attends.

We do not need more research, more reports and more evidence.

We need hard-nosed political will and some serious additional funding.

We need to devise simple and transparent funding arrangements.

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We should also be aware that while matters such as establishing definitions of disability to assess need are important, they are ancillary to the central issue and should not be used to further delay equitable funding arrangements.

The independent sector is more than willing to participate in developing the policy of any political party willing to design a scheme to work through these implementation issues.

No funding system will be perfect and as we move forward, it might be worth accepting a bit of 'rough justice' rather than what we now have which is a lot of 'rough injustice'. It is worth reflecting that a child who was born in the year that the *Disability Discrimination Act* was passed will finish school next year. What sort of a deal did those children get? Surely today's cohort deserve a better deal.

billdaniels

PROFILE

Bill Daniels is Executive Director of the Independent Schools Council of Australia. Prior to serving three years as Deputy Executive Director of the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service, Bill held several senior appointments in the Commonwealth's education portfolio. He also served as Chief of Staff for Senator John Carrick when he was Minister for Education.



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