

Disability services privatised and targeted for more cuts in Australia's public schools

By Susan Allan
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The public education system in Australia is beset by myriad funding cuts, all of which compromise the ability of teachers and schools to provide the best possible education to their students. One of the most egregiously under-funded areas is the provision of services to students with disabilities.

Across the country's six states there is a patchwork of different funding models for such students. Everywhere, however, the trend is the same—governments are moving to cut funding for disability services, providing more profit-making opportunities to various corporate interests, and placing mounting pressure on under-trained and under-resourced teachers to individually address an array of complex physical, psychological, intellectual and other disabilities.

The situation is most advanced in the state of Victoria. Victoria's Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD), first established in 1995, provides schools with targeted funding for students who qualify under one of seven categories: physical disability, visual impairment, hearing impairment, severe behaviour disorder, intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder, and severe language disorder.

All students who qualify for the PSD are allocated annual funding of between \$6,000 and \$51,000 each, depending on the assessed severity of their disability. The largest proportion of eligible students (approximately 40 percent) receives \$15,000 a year, while another 25 percent receive \$24,000. The majority of this money is usually allocated to Education Support staff, who support the student in the classroom and schoolyard for a part of the school week, though can also be spent on equipment and teacher training.

The government's own figures make clear the inadequacy of the PSD. Just 4 percent of the public school population qualify, while another 11 percent are estimated to have a disability, yet receive no targeted funding.

School administrators and teachers are nevertheless legally obligated, under disability and equal opportunity legislation, to provide "reasonable adjustments" to allow all those with

disabilities to fully participate in school life. According to one government document, "reasonable adjustments" may include, but not be limited to, "infrastructure adjustments, the use of ES [Education Support] staff, or adjustments in teaching approaches or styles to adapt to the strengths and needs of particular students."

The vagueness of these formulations is undoubtedly deliberate. It has worked to divert parent frustration and anger away from the government, and led to a situation where, in some public schools, parents of disabled children who do not qualify for PSD funding have bitterly clashed with overworked teachers and school administrators over rival assessments of what constitutes a "reasonable adjustment" within the classroom and the school.

Such angry reactions on the part of parents are not confined to those whose children fail to qualify. Many parents of children who do qualify, complain that their funding is inadequate and blame schools and teachers for failing to provide enough services and support.

Parent complaints to regional and higher educational authorities, beyond the local school, including threats of legal action, are becoming more prevalent, and these place immense pressure on under-resourced schools, principals and teachers to meet ever-increasing demands.

Disabled students who qualify, including those in wheelchairs with profound disabilities, are not always given full-time education support staff for every hour of the school day or week. This means that for several hours in a school day, when classes in art or physical education, for example, are being held, students with disabilities have no additional support. Teachers are expected to carry the burden: to teach their classes, provide continuous one-on-one support to their disabled students, as well as deal with their other students who may have learning, social, emotional or behavioural issues. It is not uncommon for teachers to have several students in their classrooms who have just missed out on disability funding by one percentage point.

The government's denial of urgently needed funding to 11 percent of public school students is a product of its

extraordinarily stringent eligibility criteria.

For example, for students on the autism spectrum to qualify for PSD funding, they require three separate assessments—from a paediatrician, a psychologist, and a speech pathologist—confirming not merely that they have autism, but also that they demonstrate “significant deficits in adaptive behaviour” and “significant deficits in language skills.” This latter criterion is exceptionally difficult to satisfy, because a “significant deficit” effectively means that the child cannot understand simple instructions or verbalise basic needs and demands. Students with autism can therefore display comorbid health issues, severe learning difficulties, violent and other challenging classroom behaviours, and yet be immediately denied funding on the basis that they are able to engage in extremely limited verbal communication.

A report issued by the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission in 2012, “Held Back: The experiences of students with disabilities in Victorian schools,” noted the “perverse incentive” for parents to make their child’s disability seem as bad as possible. One parent told the Commission: “We took our son off all his medication prior to his last assessment to ensure he presented as badly as possible as that was the only way we could easily gain access to a special school for secondary school.”

For two of the designated disability criteria—severe language disorder and intellectual disability—the government contracts out the task of assessing children to a multi-billion-dollar corporation.

In 2007, the former Victorian Labor government of John Brumby imposed the “Outsourced Assessment Service” that remains in operation today. Currently, 63 percent of all students who qualify for the PSD, do so on the basis of the intellectual disability criterion. This means that a large proportion of funding applications for students with disabilities go, not to the state Education Department, but to a private business, Assessments Australia (AA).

AA is owned by MAX Solutions, which is itself a wholly owned subsidiary of the US-based MAXIMUS. MAXIMUS reported \$US2.4 billion in revenue for the fiscal year 2016. The company operates outsourced and privatised health, welfare, education, and administrative services in countries including the US, Canada, Britain, Australia and Saudi Arabia.

In Australia, MAXIMUS profits from the notorious “work for the dole” scheme, which forces unemployed workers to take on onerous and menial jobs merely to keep receiving unemployment entitlements. A 2015 article in the *Saturday Paper* reported: “The US company now dominates the ‘welfare business’ in Australia, having picked up 27

employment services contracts across the country, including 14 of the 51 regional Work for the Dole co-ordinator contracts.”

Within the Victorian education system, a teacher can now spend many hours filling out lengthy pre-screen reports on a student’s physical, academic, communicative, social and other abilities as part of an application for intellectual disability funding, only to have MAXIMUS deny the funding after sending one its employees to the school to spend 45 minutes testing the student.

The state Labor government is preparing further regressive measures. In April 2016, it issued a report reviewing the PSD, much of which was focussed on creating additional obligations for classroom teachers, such as further “reasonable adjustments” for those students diagnosed with autism or dyslexia. The review also proposed investigating a new funding model for the PSD, utilising new and “more efficient” disability assessment procedures, which are being introduced with the rollout of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). Precisely what this will entail remains to be seen, but the report notably promoted New Zealand’s Ongoing Resources Scheme as an alternative funding proposal. The NZ scheme allocates disability funding to just 1 percent of all NZ students, one-quarter the percentage of students being funded in Victoria.

It is clear that new and major funding cuts are in the pipeline. They will exacerbate an already dysfunctional public school system, undermining even further the democratic right of all young people, including those who are disabled, to a high-quality, fully-resourced public education.

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