



ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations

The parent voice on public education

25 August 2014

Submission to the Expert Panel Review on Students with Complex Needs and Challenging Behaviour

The ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations (Council) is the peak body for government school parents and citizens associations in the ACT. Council's objective is to foster a quality public education system, provide support services for affiliates and make representations to government on behalf of parents.

Introduction

It is Council's belief that all students with complex needs and challenging behaviour should be treated with respect. Adequate resources and support need to be provided in order to address the unique educational and social needs of these students.

It is important to note that the ineffective management of students with complex needs and challenging behaviour not only adversely affects the students in question, but also other students, teachers and the school community in general. For the benefit of all students in the classroom, students with complex needs/challenging behaviour need to be adequately supported.

Council notes the relationship between students with complex needs/challenging behaviour and students with a disability and this submission reflects that link. However, Council is also aware that this correlation is not exclusive. Many students with complex needs and/or challenging behaviour have not been diagnosed with a disability.

Community and Parental Experiences

Over the past decade there have been a large number of legislative assembly reports, reviews and reports into educational issues that are related to students with complex needs and challenging behaviour. Of particular note is the original Shaddock review in 2009. Council is generally concerned with the lack of targeted and meaningful change in these areas, especially with the existence of a large number of reports to draw inspiration and guidance from.

The final report by the Taskforce on Students With Learning Difficulties (released in February of 2015) outlines a number of recommendations that are related to students with complex needs and challenging behaviour. Positive reports have been received from the schools that are engaged in the 'Response to Intervention' pilot program. Council is supportive of the recommendations outlined in this comprehensive report and calls for continued funding and support to support the goals of this taskforce.

On the whole, Council is of the belief that negative situations arise when classroom teachers, support staff and principals are provided with inadequate training, support and resources. Council recommends that the following measures and programs are actioned:

1. Practical solutions for students with complex needs and challenging behaviour be established immediately as a major priority

Overall this review is for the benefit of the education system generally. Council wants this review to lead to real outcomes and changes. The review should focus on immediate and real outcomes, along with long-term changes. There is the perception that there have been too many reviews and not enough action.

2. Early Identification and Intervention

It is crucial that student who may need additional help are identified early and subsequently provided with resources and support as appropriate.

Evidence suggests that challenging behaviour develops early on and become progressively worse if the underlying cause is not addressed. Early identification and intervention is crucial at a very young level to ensure that problems do not become harder to deal with (and more costly) in the long run. Challenging behaviour is often a cry for help. Few teachers in preschool and kindergarten are appropriately trained to identify and seek help for children in this category.

3. System-wide cultural change is crucial

It is evident that widespread cultural change is required system-wide in order to best accommodate students with complex needs/challenging behaviour.

Council is aware that the experience of parents and students with complex needs/challenging behaviour varies from school to school. It is evident that widespread cultural change is required in order to foster a supportive and appropriate response to the unique needs of these students.

Council recommends that ETD continue to support and expand the everyone-everyday program. Principals should be supported and encouraged to foster an inclusive culture at their school.

4. Existing support structures need to be enhanced and utilised

In theory, Council believes that the necessary structures and programs are in place to provide adequate support to school leaders and staff. However school networks, DECOs and directorate level services need to be better utilised and supported. Current structures and programs seem to be significantly under resourced. It takes too long for schools to request support and also too long for ETD to respond.

For example, the DECO position has the potential to be a fantastic resource for students, parents and teachers alike. However in reality, the effectiveness, knowledge and passion of the appointed staff member varies greatly from school to school.

The Disability Education Reference Group (DERG) is another example of a tool that

in theory could provide solid outcomes. Steps should be taken to ensure that DERG becomes a policy and procedures based committee that directly influences and shapes day to day practices in schools.

5. Enrolment processes for students with complex needs/challenging behaviour should be clarified

The enrolment of students with complex needs/challenging behaviour is an important process.

Council believes that students placed in any educational setting (be that inclusion in a mainstream school, a dedicated unit within a mainstream school or a special school setting), should have their needs appropriately met. Steps should be taken to make it easier for parents to assess which school/educational setting is appropriate for their child. The current enrolment process for units and special schools is complex and difficult for parents to navigate.

6. Rights and responsibilities of all parties need to be clearly communicated

Many parents are unsure as to their rights and responsibilities when it comes to the education of their child with complex needs/challenging behaviour. These responsibilities need to be more clearly explained in current policies and procedures. Similarly, the responsibilities for schools, teachers, ETD and other support staff need to be clearly explained, rather than assuming this information is obvious.

Student Management and Support

1. Regular evaluation of teaching and assessment methods

Council strongly believes that education is the path to a healthy and successful life, increasing both choices and capabilities. Unequal education opportunities can be a catalyst for negative outcomes such as lack of career choices and ultimately a loss of freedom and independence.

Teaching and assessment methods must be as inclusive as possible. The inclusion of students with complex needs/challenging behaviour in educational settings should be encouraged and supported. Such students may thrive in an inclusive setting. In addition, other students may learn to become tolerant of the personal circumstances of others. However, adequate resources and support must be provided for this to be successful.

There may be situations where the inclusion of a student is to the significant detriment to both that student and others. Any decisions to remove a student from a setting may be made when it is considered detrimental to the student to remain in their current setting. Alternatives for placement **MUST** be provided by ETD and appropriate support needs put in place for the transition.

Such decisions need to be made with careful consideration to the individual educational and social needs of the student in question.

2. Individual Learning Plans

ILPs form an important tool in assisting students to achieve educational outcomes. Council believes that there should be a focus on the importance of learning social and life skills when appropriate. ILPs should also be phased into a digital form. Online ILPs would allow educators, support staff and school leaders quick and accurate access to understand the needs of individual students. Such an approach will also allow for a better transition between different teachers and year groups.

3. Behavioural Management Plans

Council believes specific behavioural management plans should be developed for specific behaviours. Such plans should be developed in consultation with parents, allied health professionals and ETD. Classroom teachers, LSAs and the school DECO should act as important stakeholders in this process. Importantly, the management plan should be made available to other teachers, casual staff, LSAs and future teachers as the student progresses. ETD should provide dedicated directorate-level staff members tasked with assisting schools in drafting these plans and communicating best-practice research.

Supporting Educators

1. School DECO to run training for school staff

As stated previously, the DECO position should be a useful resource for students, parents and teachers alike. However, these staff members need to be passionate individuals who are adequately recognised and appropriately trained in disability education and awareness. The DECO position should form a one-stop-shop for information and assistance. To encourage the development of an active support network, DECOs should be active in providing training and professional development programs for other school staff members.

2. Financial incentives for educators to specialise in disability education/behaviour management

Consideration should be given to providing teachers financial incentives to specialise in disability education and behaviour management.

Similarly, tertiary education providers should be encouraged to offer recognised qualifications that relate to this area.

3. Disability education training for teachers and assistants

All teachers should have training in disability education and behavioural management techniques. These are crucial areas that cannot be simply left to 'learn on the job'.

Awareness training is important, but should not be the only focus. Educators should be taught how to communicate with non-verbal students, make classroom adjustments to manage children with special needs, positive behavioural support management, how to write comprehensive ILP's, understanding and managing challenging behaviour.

In particular, targeted training should be given to teachers assistants. The roles and responsibilities of these assistants should be clearly communicated and outlined to parents and students alike.

Service Provision and Funding

1. Re-examination of the resource allocation process

Council believes that the SCAN process needs to be transparent and accountable. For many years, Council has argued that the SCAN process needs to be allocated in an equitable, transparent and consistent manner (as stipulated in ETD policy). The current system is far from perfect. Parents are not informed of the resources allocated to their child based on their support needs.

The process is focussed on deficits and what a student cannot do. This is contrary to ETD policy which aims to "establish and maintain a supportive school environment for students with a disability and promote positive attitudes towards students with a disability within the school community". Students and their families should be able to access vital resources through a process that is positive and supportive. The current process needs to be changed to one which focusses on outcomes and strengths.

In general, SCAN funding is limited. If students with a major disability are to access mainstream education, the SCAN process is only able to deliver the equivalent of .5 of a full time support worker. In order to adequately approach the needs of students with complex needs, more support is required. Additional funding is currently the discretionary responsibility of the school principal. Within the school budget this may create a very unequal distribution of resources depending on the situation.

2. Clarification in regards to school based therapy

As it stands, Therapy ACT has provided psychologists, occupational therapists, speech therapists and social workers to teachers, students and families. They have provided consultations on sensory processing management strategies, classroom learning adjustments, and behavioural support plans for children with complex needs/challenging behaviour.

Recently this resource has disappeared with the advent of the NDIS. The NDIA has categorically stated that it will not provide therapy within a school based environment. Council is extremely concerned that there will be a significant decline in effective allied health support structures for children with complex needs and challenging behaviour.

School based therapy is an essential resource that needs to be retained. Immediate steps need to be taken to rectify the apparent gap in service provision.

Conclusion

Council hopes that this submission will help trigger changes in the way that students with complex needs/challenging behaviour are approached.

After the commissioning of reports, reviews and countless recommendations over the years, Council strongly believes that it is time for real structural and cultural change.

Council is happy to expand on any of the issues raised above and to provide additional information if requested.