

learning links



Helping Kids Learn

www.learninglinks.org.au

Information Sheet 6

Inclusion – a time for change

A Parent's Update on the McRae Study

by Tracey Hawthorne Said

Parents of students with special needs are inevitably confronted with the difficult decision of where their child should go to school.

Do they choose a School for Specific Purposes (SSP); a support class that guarantees ongoing assistance, staffing and resources but lacks social integration; or an integrated setting where enrolment may be refused and where resources are limited by funding procedures that are re-negotiated every twelve months?

At such a difficult time, funding is a major hurdle to overcome for most parents. The funding allocated to a child is currently dependent on the type and degree of disability together with other rigid guidelines that tend to be based on 'classes' rather than the actual needs of students.

In July 1996, David McRae completed a study commissioned by the NSW Minister for Education and Training to investigate the inclusion (or integration) of students with special needs in the regular school setting.

The basic philosophy of McRae's findings is a shift in emphasis to each child's educational needs and more choice for their parents. In this article we focus on the findings from a parent's perspective and bring you up-to-date with recent developments.

Findings for parents

From the parents' point of view, McRae's study found that in order for a child to succeed academically and socially, their parents need to be satisfied with the learning environment. He also found evidence of unmet demand for integrated placements and concerns about inadequate resources and support for integrated students.

As well as these issues, the study also found that the way students with special needs have been catered for has not changed in the last decade.

There has been no increase in the budget to support students with disabilities in mainstream classes since 1990/91 despite a climate of ongoing pressure from parents, significant unmet demand, an increase in the number of children requiring special needs support, and the nature of anti-discrimination legislation and policy.

Broad proposal

In broad terms, McRae proposes a system that starts with an assessment of the educational needs of each child. The resources and level of funding needed to support each child are then determined on the basis of the assessment. Once this level of financial assistance is determined and allocated to each child, it is guaranteed and 'tied' to that child.

A child can take their level of funding with them to whatever educational option chosen by their parents. Under McRae's proposal, staff at schools work as a team with the Special Education Consultant and parents supporting the needs of each child.

If a child moves from setting to setting, the level of funding follows the child and doesn't have to be re-negotiated.

This means we would have a system where the level of funding for each child is based on the needs of that child. The current system ties the level of funding more directly to the education setting (regular school, special school, etc) rather than the child.

Learning Links is a non-profit charity assisting children who have difficulty learning and their families.

We raise funds to help children from birth to 18 years by offering a range of services including the following.

Early Childhood Services for children from birth to six years.

- Early childhood intervention and support for very young children.
- An inclusive preschool for children with and without special needs.
- An assessment and consultancy service for families who are concerned about their young child's development.
- Specialist early childhood teaching and therapy.

School Age Services for children from Kindergarten to Year 12 who have low support needs.

- Comprehensive assessments.
- Small group tuition and therapy.
- Occupational and speech therapy programs combining specialist education services and therapy.
- Outreach programs.
- The Ronald McDonald Learning Program for seriously ill children and the Reading for Life Program for children falling behind in their reading.

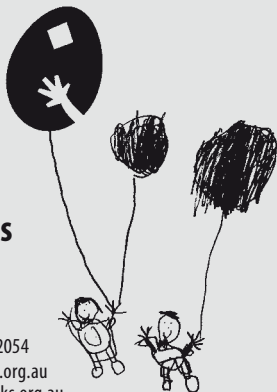
Family Services helping and supporting families and health professionals.

- Centre and home-based family counselling.
- Parenting Programs and groups for families.
- Case Management Services.

Professional Development for teachers and health professionals.

Presentations, workshops and advice on identifying and helping children with learning difficulties, learning disabilities and developmental delays.

Learning Links has branches in six Sydney locations at Peakhurst, Penshurst, Fairfield, Miller, Dee Why and Randwick. We also offer some services to children in country NSW, the ACT, Victoria and New Zealand. A complete list of branch locations and contact numbers is on the back cover.



Learning Links

Head Office

12-14 Pindari Road
Peakhurst NSW 2210
Tel: 9534 1710 Fax: 9584 2054
Email: mail@learninglinks.org.au
Website: www.learninglinks.org.au

Enquiries regarding this Information Sheet should be directed to Robyn Collins
Tel: (02) 9534 1710 Fax: (02) 9584 2054 Email: rcollins@learninglinks.org.au

© Learning Links 2006. The material in this publication cannot be reproduced without the written permission of Learning Links.

Action for McRae Coalition

Learning Links is an active supporter of inclusion and six years ago integrated their special needs preschool group into an existing community preschool. An innovative change at the time, the preschool now successfully caters for the diverse needs of all children with the added benefit of children mixing together and learning to respect each other's capabilities and personalities.

In response to McRae's findings, in 1998 Learning Links joined with a number of high profile lobby organisations to form the 'Action for McRae Coalition' to lobby for the implementation of the study's recommendations.

The Coalition is specifically concerned that despite the likely adoption of some of the report's recommendations (see box), there are some that may not be fully embraced. The Coalition would like to see the following recommendations adopted.

- Public education must be inclusive, non-discriminatory and responsive to the needs of the full range of students.
- Parents are equal partners in the education of their child.
- The system ensures that parent choice of placement is made on a balanced and informed basis.

- Resources are guaranteed according to student needs in an educational setting.
- Resource support is determined on a non-categorical basis that recognises all disabilities require support.
- An equitable distribution of available resources regardless of location and setting.
- An effective independent complaints and appeals process that reinforces fair, equitable and clear decision-making.

There is still much ongoing discussion and lobbying for the McRae Report recommendations to be implemented as they will have direct and favourable implications for families of children with special needs. A reference group has been recently formed in conjunction with the NSW Department of Education and Training and representatives of the Coalition.

If you would like to voice your concerns about the implementation of the recommendations, please write to the people listed on page six of this issue.

A copy of the McRae Report is also available to members of Learning Links from our library if you would like to read it in more detail.

McRae's recommendations likely to be adopted

The study's recommendations likely to be adopted by the Department of Education and Training that will have an impact on families with special needs children are as follows:

- the principle that education must be inclusive;
- standardised procedures for a balanced and informed placement choice;
- existing resource support to continue for each funded student;
- an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for every funded student;
- technology in schools to meet the need of students with disabilities;
- strategic planning to upgrade physical access in schools;
- accessibility to regular schools by students in SSP's to be encouraged with concurrent enrolment available;
- parents to be supported by advocates;
- base entitlements for inservice training of teachers and teacher's aides;
- regular consultation with providers of mandatory preservice training (eg. universities) with regard to content and structure of special education units;
- an independent appeals process for parents;
- key learning area outcome statements for all students; and
- review of qualification requirements for employment as a special education teacher.

Mothers have their say on Inclusion

Judy and Deborah

Deborah now 10 and in Year 4, has only ever experienced mainstream education. She has Down Syndrome.

“It’s worth the effort,” says Judy. “There’s a lot of heartache, (especially) when you think the teacher could have noticed that she’s done this or that, and all they’ve said is she’s behind and doesn’t cope (with some things). I just want to say ‘but she’s got a disability!’”

Despite minor difficulties, Deborah is well and truly accepted at her school and Judy feels they have been very lucky. The principal strongly believes in catering for all children in the area and Deborah is not the school’s first child with Down Syndrome.

“A lot of principals look at the fact that they can’t get a lot of funding – 5 hours a week is not a lot of time to help a child with a disability,” explains Judy. “If you put them in a unit with a small number of children, 15 to 18 at the most, they can put together all their funding.

“I think the hardest problem is teachers not having enough background information on special needs or children with Down Syndrome to know where to go next. They aren’t trained in special education, but they are trained (to handle) a variety of different children so they adapt as best they can.

“Teachers have expectations and it’s rewarding to see children progress. It’s a bit deflating at the end of the year if a teacher doesn’t think they’ve got that far,” she says.

“Once teachers understand more about how special needs children learn, it will help their perception of success.”

Deborah will go on to year 6 and then high school. Judy knows a lot of high schools have a special unit and they don’t mainstream. “They haven’t taken the big step,” she says.

“Everyone has to be aware that she’s coming and be willing to accept her. It has to be a whole school thing because they are bigger communities and she has to take a whole lot of subjects. Even if we pick a special unit, we want integration into the mainstream.”

Judy has some excellent advice about finding a school for a child with Down Syndrome. “I would definitely start going around to my local schools two years before,” she says.

“Look at the school community and make the principals aware that you’re thinking of starting your child there, so it’s not a big shock. Work on the feeling that you get back from the principal.

“You can push to send your child to a mainstream school, but if the staff aren’t behind it, you’re always going to feel a little bit negative.

“Sometimes with all the publicity, people think (they) have a right to send their child to a school. I think if you go patiently and calmly about it, it’s a lot easier for the child and the school will respond. If you go in demanding, it gets people’s backs up.”

For Judy, mainstreaming isn’t just about Deborah learning to read and write.

“(She) has to learn to get on with other people and they have to realise she’s there but she has a disability. Mainstreaming helps other kids realise there are children with disabilities – they have feelings, they laugh, they cry, they are human beings, but they are just a little bit different.

That’s why I mainstream Deborah. It’s not really for the academic side.

“We won’t be here all the time and she has to learn to be part of our world.

“Some people are intolerant and she does get a few little hurts in her life. But that is part of life and it’s part of her growing and accepting.”

The negative side to mainstreaming for Judy is the resources. “The system doesn’t provide enough to help support (special needs children). I think schools do the best they can under the funding they’ve got.

“If funding becomes more equitable, schools will be more tolerant. They know now that they can’t cope with the extra needs because they don’t have the resources. If resources become available, teachers will be willing to do more because they know they’ve got the help to do it.”

Judy also feels if more trained teachers are in the schools, they will be more understanding of disabilities.

“Until you have a child with a disability, you don’t think of how they survive day to day. Once you understand, you become more able to cope.

“In time it will all work together.”

“Mainstreaming helps other kids realise there are children with disabilities – they have feelings, they laugh, they cry, they are human beings, but they are just a little bit different.”



Ruth and Nicole

Nicole is 7 and also has Down Syndrome. She was part of the first inclusive class program at Learning Links' Preschool.

Ruth recalls Nicole's time at preschool with great fondness. "It was wonderful. Nicole was just one of the other kids. They played together and the parents were very nice.

"While we were there they focused on the positives – on the things your child can do, where you are heading and what gains you've made. It wasn't looking at what she can't do, which I find very negative," says Ruth.

Ruth liked the six-monthly Family Service Plan meetings at Learning Links where parents, teachers, therapists and family counsellors could set short and long-term goals, as well as look back over the previous six months to see the progress and look at any concerns.

She was delighted that they could incorporate these goals and address any concerns within the normal activities of the preschool.

"In the environment of a normal preschool they could cater for the individual needs of children without making a big deal," says Ruth. "All children have to go through each stage, it's just some go through it at different times.

"Everybody was benefiting from the exercises for the special needs kids. When they did language, they'd take a range of kids not just the special needs kids. So Nicole would be getting the things that she needed to learn, but she'd be doing it in a group and wouldn't be singled out."

"I really feel teachers should have more training in special needs. Very good teachers do not necessarily have the time or expertise to take on children such as Nicole. It's not the child's fault. She needs a teacher in tune with her."

Listening to Ruth recall Nicole's preschool experiences, it's easy to see how inclusion can benefit all children. The friendships Nicole formed with her pre-school classmates are the types of friendships we all wish for our children.

Unfortunately for her parents, Nicole's transition to a mainstream school was clouded by battles for government assistance. Luckily for Nicole those difficulties didn't spill over into the classroom.

"(The teacher) was very caring. The aide would come in and work with Nicole and the other children and everything went extremely well."

Nicole's second year was a different story. Ruth remembers her concerns when Nicole was assigned her Year 1 teacher and the difficult incidences that followed. Her hope that Nicole would stay in a mainstream school at least until the end of the year was over when she was offered a place in a special unit at another school at the end of first term.

After such a traumatic start, it is natural to hope for a smooth transition to a new school. Instead, continued problems with finalising the placement together with the difficulties of settling in with relief teachers meant things initially went from bad to worse.

Nicole has since settled in well and Ruth is very happy with her work. "(The teacher) has increased her mathematical skills and extended her vocabulary. We chose the school because we knew she was an exceptional teacher," says Ruth.

"But I still have some concerns because the social side is gone – that lovely interaction where she was just another kid. She's with the small group now and she's not making friends with regular kids. Things like this we've lost but we've gained in other areas.

"We did get kindergarten and we had all that wonderful time at preschool. I wouldn't change what I've done for Nicole. (In the tough times), I feel like all I've done for my child has come to zero because she's in a special unit anyway."

Despite their difficult experiences, Ruth feels inclusive education is wonderful if it's handled correctly. "If we had a supportive teacher at the start of this year it would have worked," says Ruth.

"I really feel teachers should have more training in special needs. Very good teachers do not necessarily have the time or expertise to take on children such as Nicole.

It's not the child's fault. She needs a teacher in tune with her."

"While parents want their children to grow socially and intellectually, I expect they also want their children to grow in a society that is accepting of people with disabilities and differences."



Advocacy, Inclusion and Children

by Jeff Bailey

Director, CHERI, New Children's Hospital, Westmead & Professor of Special Education, University of western sydney, Nepean

For many years I have enjoyed being an advocate for children with disabilities and learning problems. Advocacy involves being committed to and acting for people to ensure equity of opportunity, access, treatment, and outcomes. To guarantee this equity for all children, child-care centres, preschools, and schools need an embracing philosophy, a commitment to diversity, appropriate resources, and excellent programs to diminish any disadvantage to children.

There is growing support for children with disabilities to access educational and life experiences in more 'normal' settings. The concepts of 'normalisation', 'mainstreaming', and 'integration' suggest that children with 'differences' should be placed in settings with people who do not have those differences. Educational and social services should offer the 'least restrictive alternative'.

An extension of these concepts is inclusion. 'Full' inclusion proponents suggest that every child should be educated in the neighbourhood preschool or school, with age-appropriate peers, by general (not specially trained) teachers – regardless of type or degree of disability.

Many parents want their children to attend child-care, preschool and school settings which are inclusive, that is, environments in which difference and diversity are respected and honoured, and each child's individual needs are met. While parents want their children to grow socially and intellectually, I expect they also want their children to grow in a society that is accepting of people with disabilities and differences.

The challenges for the implementation of inclusive education are many. Buildings have to be modified to

accommodate less mobile children. Teachers may need extensive in-service education. Educational programs have to be individualised and made appropriate for all children. Families with non-disabled children need to be prepared for the new children.

But will all parents of children with disabilities choose a regular preschool or school? Some may prefer a range of educational environments. Child-care and preschool settings provide excellent models of inclusiveness, often without the need for significant structural changes. But in primary education we may need learning support services, resource rooms for withdrawal instruction, special units in regular schools, and even segregated settings. Many factors will determine parents' choice of an educational setting: their own philosophy on inclusion, the nature and severity of their child's disability, the age of the child, previous educational experiences, the reputation of the neighbourhood preschool or school, and the adequacy of support systems. The decision is a vitally important one.

In my role as director of the Children's Hospital Education Research Institute (CHERI), I have new advocacy responsibilities – for children with chronic illnesses. In our recent study of children with cystic fibrosis we noted the significant demands being made of these children in their school-hospital transitions. In the absence of any

specific school support, the resilience and strength of these young people impressed us. We call them 'solitary copers' because they appear to bear full responsibility for being included and for compensating for their disabling conditions. Their health problems can be compounded by academic and social difficulties: frequent hospitalisation, missing schoolwork, falling behind and having to catch up, and limited social contact with peers.

Yet these children receive little in the way of extra support. On return to school they struggle to be 're-included'. While they do not have conventional disabilities, their frequent absences and need for special accommodations handicap them. The experience has forced me to become an advocate for chronically ill children.

It is important that we understand where we stand on the rights of all children to fair and equitable opportunity and treatment. Each of us has to recognise our responsibility to develop a society that is healthy and health engendering – a society in which all people regardless of their differences or similarities are respected and appreciated. Each of us should ask: 'What is my level of commitment to active advocacy for children?'

Reprinted with kind permission from 'Every Child, Volume 4, No. 2, Winter 1998'

What is Inclusion?

"Providing children with an education as close as possible to that provided in the regular school, which also provides the maximum opportunity for social interaction and acceptance by their peers."

Dr. G. L. Robinson
Senior Lecturer, Special Education Centre
University of Newcastle



www.learninglinks.org.au

Early Childhood Services
– all enquiries to Head Office

School Age Services
– contact your local branch

Family Services
– contact your local branch

All other enquiries
– Head Office

Head Office
12-14 Pindari Road
Peakhurst NSW 2210
Telephone: (02) 9534 1710
Preschool: (02) 9533 3283
Facsimile: (02) 9584 2054
Email: mail@learninglinks.org.au

Northern Suburbs Branch
2 Alfred Road
PO Box 634
Brookvale NSW 2100
Telephone: (02) 9907 4222
Facsimile: (02) 9907 4244
Email: nsb@learninglinks.org.au

Western Suburbs Branch
Unit 7/9 William Street
PO Box 1026
Fairfield NSW 1860 (2165)
Telephone: (02) 9754 2377
Facsimile: (02) 9755 9422
Email: wsb@learninglinks.org.au

Southern Suburbs Branch
10 Railway Parade
Penshurst NSW 2222
Telephone: (02) 9580 4888
Facsimile: (02) 9580 4788
Email: ssb@learninglinks.org.au

South West Sydney Branch
88 Shropshire Street
PO Box 42
Miller NSW 2168
Telephone: (02) 8783 7111
Facsimile: (02) 8783 7222
Email: sws@learninglinks.org.au

Eastern Suburbs Branch
1/20 Silver Street
Randwick NSW 2032
Telephone: (02) 9398 5188
Facsimile: (02) 9326 5364
Email: esb@learninglinks.org.au

Please help us help children

Please PRINT

- I would like to donate \$_____ to help kids who have difficulty learning.
- I would like to be a member of Learning Links. *Please tick appropriate box below.*
 - Individual or Family \$45 (including GST)
 - Professional \$45 (including GST)
 - Not for profit Organisation \$55 (including GST)
 - Corporate \$70 (including GST)

Individual, Family and professional membership includes one copy of *Learning Links News*

I enclose my: Cheque Money Order **or**

Charge my: BANKCARD VISA MASTERCARD AMEX

Account No: _____ CCV*: _____

Visa and Mastercard last 3 digits on back of card.

Account Name: _____ Expiry Date: ____ / ____

Signature: _____

Name (Dr, Mr, Mrs, Miss, Ms): _____

Organisation/Business: _____

Address: _____

Postcode: _____

Tel: (Home): _____ (Business): _____

Please post to Learning Links: 12-14 Pindari Road, Peakhurst NSW 2210. *Donations over \$2 are tax deductible and will be receipted.*

