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For immediate release

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Time for Transformation: Breaking the NSW's Dual Track Education System

The NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into the experiences of children and young people with disability in NSW educational settings has handed down its report today, with 20 findings and 28 recommendations.

The NSW inquiry was established off the back of the landmark Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, which found that Australia's education systems are failing to deliver inclusive education that protects students with disability from violence, abuse and neglect. The NSW government has three months to respond to this Report by 22 November, 2024.

Quotes from Cecile Sullivan Elder, Executive Officer, Family Advocacy NSW, a not for profit disability advocacy organisation and founding member of the Australian Coalition of Inclusive Education:

"Family Advocacy appreciates the Parliamentary Education Committee took heed of the many stories we shared of children with disability being failed by the NSW education system such as refused entry into their local school, being denied reasonable adjustments which not only resulted in a lost opportunity to learn and belong but often, suspensions, expulsions and/or restrictive practices.

The committee acknowledged the failure of the current dual track education system in being unanimous in recommending that the NSW Government move towards a school system which enables more students with disability to be enrolled in mainstream, inclusive school settings, with a focus on the rights of the child with disability, rather than the interests of the school. Of the 28 recommendations, we particularly agree with those that boost parent engagement, enhance workforce capability, and create an independent complaints system. We also applaud the Committee for Finding 6 in being concerned with and calling out the NSW Department of Education's definition of Inclusive Education, as outlined in the Inclusive Education Statement for students with disability, as being inconsistent with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Having said this, we cannot overlook the fact that nearly 29,000 NSW students with disability in 114 special schools and over 2000 segregated support classes will stay segregated from their non-disabled peers. The NSW government response to the Disability Royal Commission's recommendations supports the status quo of keeping a dual track system of mainstream and special schools, which is unacceptable.

It is very hard to make the mainstream inclusive when another system receives significant funding and additional expertise. And while this other system exists to take students who may not easily fit into the mainstream, there is less motivation for mainstream schools to get inclusion right. This status quo has been happening for the last 30 years, with little improvement to the mainstream system. If we continue along this vein, we are deeply concerned there will be even more students with disability segregated from their neighbourhood friends and siblings.

Let's put things into perspective. With a swathe of disability policy reform on the agenda both now (and let's face it, over decades!) Family Advocacy sees the potential for transformational change over the adoption of short-term tinkering of the NSW education system. We know what needs to be done. Despite so many recommendations for reform, our calls from families who have a child with disability facing educational barriers have continued to rise steadily over the last 5 years.

Too often, children and young people with disability have become collateral damage where the decision for political expediency has trumped the decision to do what is needed and right. The NSW government has the opportunity to show political and moral leadership to adopt those recommendations of this Parliamentary Inquiry that ensure all students, regardless of their abilities, can succeed in an inclusive general education classroom. The time for decisive action is now.

ENDS

About Family Advocacy

We work with families to help them defend and promote the interests and rights of people with developmental disability.

Please contact Cecile Sullivan Elder, Executive Officer on 9869 0866 for more information or to arrange an interview.