Facing up to a long term problem – Queensland showing the way

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Queensland has a long term problem in education that will not go away. It is about the increasing numbers of students with disability now attending the classrooms of both our government and non-government schools.

The figures speak for themselves.

Across Australia, the number of funded students with disability in all school sectors increased by 28 per cent between 2005 and 2010, from 134,864 to 172,300. The increase in enrolments in Queensland Catholic schools over the same time period was substantially higher, at 88 per cent. During the last six years (2006-2012) the increase has been higher at 92 per cent.

The breakdown across the different categories of disabilities are worth noting as this impacts on support needs. In Catholic schools the distribution of categories are:

- Autism - 46 per cent
- Social-emotional - 15 per cent
- Hearing - 12 per cent
- Intellectual - 11 per cent
- Speech-language impairment - 10 per cent

The fastest growing category of disability and the largest group by far is autism. Such children are the most demanding in the classroom.

Interestingly, in Queensland Catholic schools 70 per cent of students with disability are male which is in keeping with international data. This is an area needing more research to improve policy actions.

This growth in numbers and the proportion of children with disabilities across all schools stems from several factors – improved medical services and life expectations, better diagnosis, and changing demographic factors concerning parents.

There are also policy and professional practice drivers.

Government anti-discrimination legislation has imposed obligations on all schools to provide improved services to students with disabilities. Non-government schools
cannot directly or indirectly ignore the needs of students with disabilities. Such students should not only gain entry into particular schools of their choosing, but also their special needs have to be met. More parents want to send their children to their school of preference – an accepted tenet of education policy in Australia.

Further, changing education practices mean a greater proportion of students with disabilities are now educated in regular classrooms rather than in special schools. Such ‘mainstreaming’ is seen as a better way to improve the life and job opportunities of students with disabilities.

The issue is how to cope with this influx and expected ongoing increases?

Based on our focus groups, discussions and meetings with parents, teachers and principals across Queensland and a review of other jurisdictions, there is a need for more professional development of staff, access to external support services and specialised knowledge, the employment of specialist and visiting teachers, employment of teacher aides and support staff, curriculum adaptation, purchase of special equipment, cooperation between all schools sectors to make transitions from one level or school system to another easier and greater understanding by all parents of the challenges facing schools and teachers in the modern classroom.

But these needs require not just more resources, but ones that are better targeted and more certain so schools can plan, programs developed, tested and modified and teacher skills built on over a number of years.

A number of Commonwealth and State support programs for these children like the Queensland Advisory Visiting Teacher program are short term and subject to current budgetary pressures. And we are all awaiting the outcome of the Gonski Review which has important proposals for this area.

Consequently, Catholic schools have had to dig a little deeper to meet the needs of children with disabilities. Students with disabilities in Catholic schools only receive 59% of the national government school average of $13,232 – a situation that will worsen in the future given growing projected numbers.

The real challenge is not just more resources, as there are many demands on government. Nor can anyone expect increased support to arrive immediately. What is needed are some measures to tackle immediate issues, but more importantly a focus on developing a strategy that tackles issues in the long term, that is proactive rather than reactive, that is supported by all stakeholders.

In the short term the Queensland Government could establish a pool of resources for students with disability in the state, to be divided proportionally between government and non-government schools, and to be applied flexibly to fund specialist assistance
and classroom, administrative and technical support to meet the educational needs of students with disability and special learning needs. This might be accompanied by additional funding to be provided in the *State Special Needs Program* for the specific purpose of resourcing schools so that teachers attempting to address the needs of students with disability and special learning needs have the necessary time to plan and prepare. An extension for just a couple of years of the *Advisory Visiting Teacher Program* and a requirement that it be administered in a collaborative, sector-blind way, so that resources and services are equally available to government and non-government schools is another suggestion.

In the longer term, the Queensland Government could show the way to the other states and the Commonwealth by developing a long term policy that responds to the educational needs of these students, wherever they attend school. Such a policy would need to be based on research, clarification of resource support and a review of existing arrangements to understand what works best for different groups of students in different contexts, and should complement the support that is available under the National Disability Insurance Scheme (Disability Care).

If Queensland wants to look ahead to the next 30 years as Premier Newman is suggesting in his proposed Queensland Plan, then he could do no better than to start in this important policy area!

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