



Queensland Parents for People with a Disability Inc

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Queensland Parents for People with a Disability Inc
PO Box 158, Virginia BC, Qld 4014
Phone: 0447 010 260
Email: office.manager@qppd.org
Approval: QPPD Board of Management

Submission in response to proposed Education Amendment 2013 (Strengthening Discipline in State Schools)

Queensland Parents for People with a Disability Inc (QPPD) is a parent-based, mission-driven organisation that was established in 1981 to “vigorously defend justice and rights for people with disability by exposing exclusionary practices, speaking out against injustices and promoting people with disability as respected, valued and participating members of society.”

In working towards this mission, parent members from QPPD have consistently advocated for inclusive education for students with disability on the basis that through inclusion in all walks of life, all people learn the importance of belonging and the democratic strength of diversity.

QPPD believes that the changes proposed in Education (Strengthening Discipline in State Schools) Amendment Bill 2013 represent a backward step in the inclusive education reform agenda. Placing such significant powers to suspend and exclude students in the hands of the school principal increases the risk that attempts to “foster a learning community that questions disadvantage and challenges social injustice” and maximise “the educational and social outcomes of all students through identification and reduction of barriers to learning, especially for those who are vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion” will be at the whim, in many cases, of a single individual.

The suggested changes are counter to the philosophy of good inclusive practice (and indeed to positive school reform generally) and place students with disability, in particular, under greater threat of damaging systemic practices including rejection and segregation. Extensive volumes of research conducted over many decades in school systems around the world indicate that disciplinary practices which result in the removal of students from school are disproportionately experienced by students who are in one or more of the following groups:

- Male
- Racial minority or non-dominant culture
- Disabled
- Low income; and
- State care (foster, group homes, juvenile centres).

Our specific concerns are listed below:

The proposed removal of behaviour plans.

Students with disability, because of problems they may face in navigating a difficult and sometimes hostile school environment, are at particular risk of exhibiting adaptive behaviours to the environment which school staff will consider challenging. Research has shown (e.g. Graham & Sweller, 2011) that children described as having

“challenging behaviour” are at increased risk of segregation. The legal requirement to have behaviour plans in place is an acknowledgment that behaviour does not happen in isolation but is a product of the interaction of many factors including the student, and the physical, social and learning environments. Behaviour plans represent good educative, evidence-based practice as opposed to punitive responses (such as suspension and exclusion) which are not founded on research evidence and which have been found to be ineffective, damaging to students, and counter-productive to good inclusive practice. **The development of behaviour plans must remain secured as a legislative requirement (rather than being reduced to a “management tool”).**

The proposed broadening of principals’ powers

QPPD has received many reports from parents about the negative attitudes of certain individual principals and the damaging effects of these negative attitudes. It has been the experience of parents that judgments about their child’s behaviour vary from school to school and principal to principal, depending on the attitude of the person involved. The same child can be welcomed and accommodated in one school, and yet described as “a threat” and “violent” in another. Policies and guidelines are not a strong enough safeguard against the impact of individual judgment. Legislation must be in place to protect vulnerable students from such severe action as suspension and exclusion. If it is deemed necessary to broaden principals’ powers, **it is critical that legislation remain in place to protect vulnerable students from such severe action as suspension and exclusion.** QPPD also respectfully requests that if these proposed changes to the legislation are made that Education Queensland publish summary data on the characteristics of students who are subjected to suspension and exclusion each year, e.g. gender, age, ethnicity and ability/disability.

The proposed extension of short-term and long-term suspensions

Students with disability are more likely to be subjected to suspension (and therefore are more likely to be affected by the proposed amendments). They need more rather than less opportunities for good teaching and social interaction with their peers. Suspension is not a sound evidence-based response to student behaviour difficulties. **We urge you to maintain legislation that is likely to decrease rather than increase suspensions (and exclusions) and to strengthen the requirement for principals to use evidence-based, positive behaviour strategies that assist with keeping students IN school.**

The argument for streamlining disciplinary process and decreasing red-tape

Students who struggle in the school system (for whatever reason) and demonstrate that struggle through their behaviour are surely the most vulnerable in our school communities. They deserve our best efforts to provide an environment that is safe, welcoming and meaningful. It is a matter of shame that the leaders of our education system regard decreasing “red-tape” in the disciplinary process, so as to ease the administrative burden on principals, as a higher priority than the needs of our most at-risk students. Surely it is the purpose of schools (and the role of principals) to ensure the welfare and positive learning experiences of students. Everyone will benefit when our school communities develop the skills to include *all* children. **We urge you to focus on sound, evidence-based, positive educational practice rather than on responses that are founded on easing “red tape”.**

Proposals that are contrary to principal-parent partnerships

The development of school and community partnerships is promoted as an important item on DETE's "Pursuit of Excellence" agenda. In no area is the partnership between schools and parents more vital than in creating safe, welcoming, meaningful learning environments for vulnerable students. Parents' knowledge of their children is critical in developing an effective and positive plan to assist students to participate as valued members of their school community. Changes to legislation which prevent parents from being involved in formulating a response to the challenges that students face in schools is counterproductive to good outcomes for all involved. **The legislation must NOT be changed in any way that limits parents' right to be involved in decision-making around such severe and potentially damaging actions as suspension and exclusion.**

Conclusion

DETE has made commendable inroads into the implementation of inclusive education reform. While there is still a long way to go, the commitment to this reform agenda is encouraging. QPPD regards the proposed changes to education legislation as a retrograde step. They will work against good inclusive practice and indeed, as indicated in the public briefing, appear to be heading towards the provision of separate facilities and the rejection of students requiring additional support to learn behaviours necessary for inclusion in the school and wider community. QPPD believes the proposed changes are not in line with an educative response to the behaviour issues that students face. Neither are they in line with evidence-based practice. The use of sound, positive, evidence-based responses to students in need, as opposed to unfounded, outdated, punitive practices, builds a firm foundation for effective schools and learning environments that are good for all students.