



**Submission to
Senate Education and Employment References Committee**

**Inquiry into the current levels of access and attainment for
students with disability in the school system, and the
impact on students and families associated with inadequate
levels of support**

Revised submission – 31 August 2015

Written by:

Deborah Fewster
Head of Policy and Government Relations
Melbourne City Mission
164 – 180 Kings Way , South Melbourne 3205
Email: dfewster@mcm.org.au

Additional research and case studies:

Morgan Cataldo
Policy and Strategic Projects Officer
Melbourne City Mission
164 – 180 Kings Way, South Melbourne 3205
Email: mcataldo@mcm.org.au

Authorised by:

Ric Holland
Chief Executive Officer
Melbourne City Mission
164 – 180 Kings Way, South Melbourne 3205
Email: rholland@mcm.org.au

Table of contents

About Melbourne City Mission	p. 3
Recommendations to this Inquiry	p.4
Melbourne City Mission’s perspectives on:	
• Current levels of access and attainment for students with disability in the school system, and the impact on students and families associated with inadequate levels of support	p. 5
○ Case Study: Affirming Families	
• The social, economic and personal benefits of improving outcomes for students with disability at school and in further education and employment	p. 11
• What should be done to better support students with disability in our schools	p. 12
• The early education of children with disability	p. 14
○ Case Study: Kathy & Christopher	
Conclusion	p. 16

About Melbourne City Mission

Melbourne City Mission is one of Victoria's oldest and largest community services organisations. Our vision is to create a fair and just community where people have equal access to opportunities and resources.

We know that for children and young people experiencing disadvantage, education is a key enabler for social and economic mobility. Consequently, Melbourne City Mission has a strategic focus on supporting education participation and attainment.

Our work with children and young people with disabilities – and their families – includes early childhood intervention services, parenting support and case management services, which are strengths-based, have a human rights underpinning, and build the capacity of children and young people to participate in early years education and school, as well as broader community participation.

Melbourne City Mission's work is client-directed. Staff undertake advocacy with, and sometimes on behalf of, the people we support. As part of this work, we provide secondary consultations/expert advice on disability inclusion to universal services, including schools.

This work is necessary because of the significant barriers – cultural and practical – that children and young people encounter in the education system.

This submission provides a Victorian perspective on the key challenges and gaps. The submission draws on Melbourne City Mission's practice wisdom through our work with children and young people with disabilities who:

- are currently receiving early childhood intervention services
- are currently attending early years programs
- are currently attending school (mainstream and specialist)
- have disengaged from school.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

That the **full six years** of the Gonksi schools funding agreement be funded, in order to deliver a more equitable, needs-based model of funding (including a loading for students with disabilities that accurately reflects their relative disadvantage in education participation and attainment).

Recommendation 2:

That the Commonwealth work with the States and Territories to progress mandatory teacher training and professional development nationwide in order to foster greater knowledge and understanding of disability and improve the capacity of the education sector to respond to the needs of students with disabilities. Proposed reforms in Victoria could provide a model.

Recommendation 3:

That the Commonwealth Government invest in ongoing community education/awareness campaigns on disability inclusion, given the persistent attitudinal barriers to social inclusion for people with disabilities.

Recommendation 4:

That Commonwealth, State and Territory governments' early years policy and funding strengthen pathways to education for cohorts of 'vulnerable' children, including children who have developmental delays and/or disabilities, by:

- Increasing playgroup participation rates
- Providing universal access to three-year-old kindergarten
- Increasing rates of participation in four-year-old kindergarten.

Melbourne City Mission also notes recommendations of peak body National Disability Services to this Inquiry, including recommendations that governments:

- Report on the implementation of the *Disability Standards for Education* as part of a stronger reporting process for the *National Disability Strategy*
- Develop joint planning between schools, families and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) including collaborative approaches to planning transition from school to work.¹

¹ National Disability Services (2015), *Comments to the Senate Committee on the inquiry into the school system for students with disability*, accessed at <http://www.nds.org.au/publications>

Melbourne City Mission's response to Term of Reference (a):

Current levels of access and attainment for students with disability in the school system, and the impact on students and families associated with inadequate levels of support

Levels of access and attainment, and the impact on students and families

The Australian Bureau of Statistics notes a significant gap between students with disability and those without, notably in the attainment of Year 12 or equivalent, vocational education and training qualifications, and participation in university studies.²

Notwithstanding legislative protections – such as the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* which enshrines the rights of students with disabilities to education and training on the same basis as students without disability – and associated guidelines and standards which expressly state that all students with a disability should be able to participate in the Australian curriculum on the same basis as their peers through rigorous, meaningful and dignified learning programs, complaints to bodies such as the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC) highlight that significant barriers persist for students with disabilities. Families tell Melbourne City Mission:

- They feel that they do not have real choice in school options (parents feel steered towards – or away from – particular schools or school models)
- Schools do not always make the necessary adjustments to enable students with disabilities to participate on the same basis as students without disabilities (for example, adjustments to curriculum, physical environment, availability of equipment, classroom aids, and the development and implementation of learning and behavioural plans)
- In some mainstream schools, children and young people with disabilities are tolerated rather than included – as one parent told Melbourne City Mission *“there’s a difference between being present and participating, and between participating and being included”*. Similarly, the VEOHRC report *Held Back* observed many students are *“just getting by”* rather than genuinely participating: *“Sometimes all parents hear is ‘Johnny is doing well’ ... that is the extent of the dialogue ... there is no vision for the child.”*³
- There is the use of restrictive interventions.
- Deficits-based approaches persist – one parent previously reflected to Melbourne City Mission: *“As you’re doing the education needs assessment, you’re documenting every worst case scenario. When [he] was younger, he used to push and hit other kids. It wasn’t ‘him’, it was about what was happening for him in the environment, from a sensory point of view. Anyway, to get funding to support his needs at school, I had to paint him like some psychotic child. I had to go there. This is what you need to do.”*
- School exclusion and school refusal are significant issues (examples of this are provided in the case study immediately over the page).

² See www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4446.0main+features102009

³ Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (2012), *Held back: The experiences of students with disabilities in Victorian schools*, Melbourne

Case Study – Affirming Families

Affirming Families is an in-home behaviour support program delivered by Melbourne City Mission that helps families to develop skills, knowledge and confidence to deal with issues that may otherwise isolate a child within their family, and isolate families from the participation and inclusion in the broader community, including schooling.

The program is targeted to families with children aged 6 to 16 years of age in the northern and western metropolitan areas of Melbourne. Around 90 per cent of children and young people involved with the program present with autism. Most also hold a dual diagnosis of a mental illness (such as social anxiety) or an intellectual disability. The Affirming Families cohort spans mainstream and special school enrolment, however, many of the children and young people are not engaged in school when they present to the program:

- Some exhibit **school refusal**
- Some are **excluded from school** because of their behaviours.

In relation to school refusal/disengagement in mainstream settings, Melbourne City Mission staff note that issues arise where:

- Curriculum design does not align with students' individual learning styles and/or interests
- Teaching styles are based on consequences – this approach is not amenable to students who miss social cues, have difficulties processing information and consequently don't understand the 'rules', and/or have anxiety.

School exclusion occurs when a teacher sends a student home for reasons associated with behaviour. Melbourne City Mission staff observe that school exclusion can trigger a negative cycle for students who are at risk of disengaging, with some students making the connection that *"when I act out, I am sent home"* and repeating that behaviour time and again. Staff also note particular challenges for students with autism who have an IQ that is *"too high"* for special schools. Many of these students still find learning difficult, but because they are enrolled in a mainstream environment and deemed *"high functioning"*, when the student is not meeting a teacher's expectations, they can be labelled as *"non-compliant"* and treated as problematic.

Melbourne City Mission staff note that families accessing behaviour support programs such as Affirming Families are highly vulnerable. There is extensive research that shows 'diminished life experiences and limited life prospects' across a wide range of indicators for parents/guardians and siblings of children with disabilities, including physical health, mental health, income, housing and employment. Many of the families accessing Melbourne City Mission supports have more than one child with a disability. School exclusion – or refusal by one or more children to attend school – impacts parents' ability to get other children ready for school, go to work or simply have some 'time out'. In some families, school exclusion or persistent school refusal – in combination with other challenges – can lead to family breakdown and even relinquishment.

Key barriers to access and attainment

The key barriers to education – which are inextricably linked – include:

- **Workforce capacity** – for example, low levels of disability awareness and insufficient skills amongst teaching staff to enable the inclusion, participation and attainment of students with disabilities. Underlying reasons includes gaps in pre-service training and lack of priority accorded to this area of professional development, as well as school culture and resource constraints.
- **School culture** – schools are a microcosm of the society we live in. Consequently, the discriminatory and/or paternalistic attitudes and behaviours that are a handbrake to social inclusion for people with disabilities **generally** can also present in school environments, including:
 - inferiority
 - pity
 - hero worship (in which people “consider someone with a disability who lives independently or pursues a profession to be brave or ‘special’ for overcoming a disability”)
 - ignorance
 - ‘the spread effect’ (in which it is assumed that “*an individual’s disability affects other senses, abilities and traits*”)
 - backlash (in which “people believe individuals with disabilities are given unfair advantages”)
 - denial (in which people tend to believe that ‘hidden’ disabilities, such as cognitive impairment, are “*not bona fide disabilities needing accommodation*”)
 - stereotypes
 - fear.⁴
- **Resource constraints, including:**
 - **Insufficient support at key transition points for children and young people.**

The VEOHRC *Held Back* report identified “*poor planning and inadequate sharing of information when students with disabilities go through transition points in their education*”.

A key transition point is primary school entry. Whilst VEOHRC reported in 2012 that “*programmatic boundaries between early years supports through the Early Childhood Intervention Service [ECIS] and school may lead to loss of educational and development opportunities for children*”, Melbourne City Mission notes that the introduction of the NDIS is creating opportunities to dissipate those programmatic boundaries.

⁴ This list of attitudinal barriers is taken from the US Department of Labor Office of Disability Employment Policy cited in The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, *Attitudinal Barriers for People with Disabilities* published at www.ncwd-youth.info

Melbourne City Mission is particularly pleased that:

- In Victoria, the criteria for Early Childhood Intervention Services (ECIS) eligibility aligns with the NDIS – it is our understanding that the majority of children eligible for ECIS in the Barwon trial have transferred to the NDIS.
- Through the NDIS, ECIS support periods have been extended, so that eligible children can continue to access their ECIS supports in their first few years at school (until age 8 instead of cutting out at school entry).

This represents significant and positive reform, however, Melbourne City Mission cautions that in some families and some communities, where there is entrenched – sometimes intergenerational – disadvantage, this is often correlated with low levels of engagement with Maternal and Child Health, and low levels of participation in play groups, child care and pre-school. For these children, critical early intervention opportunities are being missed in the years leading up to school entry. These missed opportunities impact on children’s first experiences of school, heightening risk for education disengagement at later transition points, and perpetuating the cycle of disadvantage in those families and communities. Melbourne City Mission contends that assertive outreach strategies are required to engage ‘at risk’ families (and sustain their engagement) – it cannot be assumed that universal services will simply ‘pick up’ children and families with multiple and complex needs.

In relation to other transition points, the *Held Back* report noted:

- *“Funding reviews before entering secondary school may precipitate a step down in supports when a student with disability enters high school, even though the environment and curriculum may be more challenging in that new environment.”*
 - *“Transfer from specialist primary schools to mainstream secondary schools appear to be common, however the range of supports offered for this transition may be inadequate for some students with disabilities.”*
 - *“Existing programs to support effective transition from primary to secondary school, and post-school options [should] be enhanced, including allowance for longer periods for transition support for students with disabilities.”⁵*
- **Limited access to targeted additional support through special purpose funding streams, such as Victoria’s *Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD)*.** Not all students with disabilities are eligible for targeted additional support. In 2012, the VEOHRC reported that more than 100,000 students in Victorian schools had a disability that may affect their learning ability. Of these students, there were 20,883 receiving PSD funding.

Melbourne City Mission notes that, in relation to this particular State-based program, former Australian Human Rights Commissioner Graeme Innes is currently leading a review of the PSD, as part of a package of measures previously announced in Victoria in late 2014 to drive improved access and equity.

⁵ Op cit.

Pending the findings and recommendations of the PSD review, which only recently commenced, and the Victorian Government's review of the Student Resource Package (as part of the Schools Funding Review), Melbourne City Mission notes that students who cannot currently access PSD funding are meant to have their needs met through general school budgets and *"a range of other supports including the Language Support Program, student support services and the Abilities Based Learning and Education Support (ABLES) resource"*⁶.

However:

- As VEOHRC has previously noted *"this approach requires individual schools to accept these obligations and follow this policy. It also requires planning and funding based on a clear understanding of the total number of students with disabilities, the schools they attend and the supports they require."*⁷
- As Melbourne City Mission has noted earlier in this submission, workforce capacity and school culture intersect with funding constraints to heighten barriers to inclusion, participation and attainment for students with disabilities.

Melbourne City Mission is aware that the Commonwealth initiative, *More Support for Students with Disabilities*, is a particular focus for this Senate inquiry. Melbourne City Mission notes that the aforementioned VEOHRC report *Held Back* *"welcome[d] the additional funding and activities that [would] be delivered in Victorian schools under the Australian Government's More Support for Students with Disabilities initiative"* but recognised that *"questions remain regarding the program's long-term sustainability."*⁸

Whilst we note the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training's assertion that *"centres of excellence, online professional learning modules, equipment, and teacher networks [associated with the More Support for Students with Disabilities initiative] are sustainable resources that will benefit students for years to come"*⁹, Melbourne City Mission would be interested to see data on the level of engagement with these networks and online resources in the medium-term, and how these resources continue to contribute to improved access and equity for students. As an organisation that has expertise in sector capacity building¹⁰, it is Melbourne City Mission's experience that embedding a culture of reflective practice and professional development requires a level of ongoing investment.

That said, Melbourne City Mission is also aware that at the time the *More Support for Students with Disabilities* initiative was introduced, a key policy focus was the Gonski review of schools funding.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ <https://education.gov.au/more-support-students-disabilities>

¹⁰ Melbourne City Mission runs the *Family Reconciliation and Mediation Program* (FRMP), a Victorian Government funded initiative designed to build the capacity of the homelessness sector to undertake effective early intervention with young people and families. FRMP provides an online clearinghouse of resources, as well as professional development training, research and special projects, quarterly network meetings and an annual statewide conference. FRMP is in its 10th year of operation, and is widely regarded as a best practice sector capacity building model.

From our perspective, the most pressing resource issues relate not to the cessation of the short-term *More Support for Students with Disabilities* initiative, but rather:

- Access to established targeted supplementary programs (such as Victoria’s *Program for Students with Disabilities*¹¹)
- Gaps that arise as a consequence of relying on general school budgets and other non-PSD programs to meet the needs of students with disabilities
- Looking ahead, the uncertainty and lack of clarity associated with Gonski equity funding.

As education policy researcher and lecturer Glenn C Savage has recently noted: *“School funding is hard to grasp because it is made up of a complex set of policies and formulas that differ across states, territories and sectors.”*¹² For students with disabilities and their families, schools and support services, it is critical that funding:

- deliver supports that are seamless to navigate, irrespective of the complexity behind-the-scenes/machinery of government concerns
 - delivers equity
 - meets need.
- **Finally, Melbourne City Mission notes that teachers often do not have time to provide an individualised approach for students with disabilities because of the aforementioned issues around workforce capacity, schools culture, and resource availability.**

¹¹ For example, Melbourne City Mission is concerned that many children and young people with an Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) are insufficiently supported in their education. ABI is often described as a ‘hidden disability’. It is not a ‘category’ officially recognised by the Victorian Department of Education and Training, which is a significant barrier to accessing the supports that students need to maximise learning outcomes. Schools currently have to apply for student support under an associated category or are forced to absorb the support needs of the student within the existing funding arrangements. Many students do not get the level of support they need.

¹² Savage, G C (2015), ‘Give a Gonski? Funding myths and politicking derail schools debate’ in *The Conversation*, accessed at <https://theconversation.com/give-a-gonski-funding-myths-and-politicking-derail-schools-debate-44308>

Melbourne City Mission's response to Term of Reference (b):

The social, economic and personal benefits of improving outcomes for students with disability at school and in further education and employment

For students with disabilities – and their peers who are not disabled – increased participation in education by children and young people with disabilities has a range of **social and personal benefits**, including:

- Greater opportunities for encounter and connection, building social capital
- Growth in 'soft' skills – for example, interpersonal skills such as flexibility, adaptability, and understanding and respect for human diversity
- Learning opportunities and experiences which develop students' knowledge.

There are also significant **economic benefits** to improving education outcomes for students with a disability. For example, Melbourne City Mission notes that the NDIS is underpinned by an insurance model that assumes increased employment participation by people with a disability (and carers). Education is a key enabler for **employment participation**. As noted in the opening to this submission, people with disabilities are less likely to have completed Year 12 and are less likely to hold a post-school qualification than their peers who do not have a disability. Although incomplete education is not the **only** barrier to employment for people with disabilities, low education levels are highly correlated with unemployment. Australians with disabilities are more likely to be **unemployed** than those who do not have disabilities. ABS data shows that in 2012, nearly half (47.3 per cent) of all working-age people with disability were **not** in the labour force – that is they were neither employed nor actively looking for work.

This has flow-on effects for **income**. VicHealth research shows that the relative income of people with disabilities in Australia is approximately 70 per cent of those without disability (the lowest in the OECD) and that 45 per cent of Australians with disabilities live in poverty or near poverty, a situation that has worsened since the mid-1990s¹³.

Economic vulnerability also impacts **housing**. VicHealth, citing Beer and Faulkner, reports that it is common for people with a disability to 'fall out of home ownership' due to the costs of their disability, with 32 per cent of people with a disability who are rental tenants reporting that they used to be homeowners with a mortgage.

Melbourne City Mission also notes that, in 2012, almost 250,000 people receiving a Disability Support Pension also received Commonwealth Rental Assistance¹⁴. Despite receiving CRA, about three in 10 persons receiving the Disability Support Pension were still spending more than 30 per cent of gross household income on rent after CRA¹⁵. The widely accepted measure of '**housing stress**' is the proportion of lower income (first and second quintile) renter households for whom spending on rent accounts for more than 30 per cent of income.

Other consequences of economic vulnerability include **reduced transport options, reduced access to timely health care**, and **diminished access to social and leisure activities**, including participation in sport and recreation.

¹³ Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (2012), *Disability and health inequalities in Australia research summary*

¹⁴ See the AIHW analysis of the Australian Government Housing Data Set June 2012 published at <http://www.aihw.gov.au/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=6442453666+>

¹⁵ Ibid

Melbourne City Mission's response to Term of Reference (h):

What should be done to better support students with disability in our schools

To provide better support to students with disabilities – thereby, **genuinely** delivering on their **rights** to education and training on the same basis as students without disability – the three broad areas identified earlier in this submission need to be addressed:

- Workforce capacity
- School culture
- Resource constraints.

Specifically governments need to:

- **Drive improvements in school culture and improve workforce capacity through:**
 - **Broader community education/awareness campaigns.** The 'Every Australian Counts' campaign, which built momentum for the introduction of the NDIS, made a significant contribution to positioning disability rights as a mainstream community issue. However, the NDIS alone will not provide "*insurance against disabling attitudes*"¹⁶ and Melbourne City Mission believes that there is a role for government in resourcing community education/awareness, given the persistent attitudinal barriers to social inclusion for people with disabilities.
 - **Mandatory teacher training and professional development to foster knowledge and understanding of disability,** including students' entitlement to education, school responsibilities, access to resources, and practices to foster inclusion and participation (including specific training around behaviour).

Melbourne City Mission notes that the Victorian Government – as part of its *Special Needs Plan for Victorian Schools* – has committed to introducing a requirement that "*as a condition of teacher registration with the Victorian Institute of Teaching ... all new teachers [will need] to have completed a special needs component as part of their tertiary studies. Existing teachers will also undertake special needs training as part of their ongoing professional development.*"¹⁷

- **Appropriately fund supports that enable students with disabilities to participate in education and training on the same basis as students without disability.**

As noted earlier, the issues of workforce capacity, culture and resources are inextricably linked. For example, teacher training and professional development in isolation won't deliver improved outcomes unless they are backed by adequate resourcing.

As well as funding for adjustments to the physical environment, adequate funding is needed to make adjustments to the learning environment (including funding for integration aids, equipment, curriculum design/development of individually tailored learning plans, and behaviour support).

¹⁶ Leipoldt, E (2009), 'A National Disability Insurance Scheme – a barrier to service?' in *Online Opinion*

¹⁷ See <https://www.viclabor.com.au/media-releases/labors-special-needs-plan-for-victorian-schools/>

We know that outcomes are optimised when:

- **Students have an individually tailored learning plan that identifies and maximises strengths, and documents strategies to address support needs, including adjustments to the curriculum, behaviour support, aids and equipment**
- **The plan that is regularly reviewed throughout the student's development** – for example, for students with cognitive disabilities, it is particularly critical that their plans are informed by regular neuropsychological assessments (every two years or at times of significant transition, such as moving from primary to secondary school)¹⁸
- **There is a collaborative approach between schools, families and specialist services so consistency, routine and structure can be achieved for the student across all (formal and informal) learning environments.**

Each of these adjustments to the learning environment requires resources. Improvements in school culture and staff skills, knowledge and confidence are not enough to deliver better outcomes for children and young people with disabilities.

Irrespective of which 'category' students fit or the funding stream they attract – for example, special purpose funding streams such as Victoria's *Program for Students with Disabilities* or programs/funds that sit with general school budgets – the bottom line is that students who require targeted additional support to participate in education on the same basis as their non-disabled peers, have a **right** to that support.

As the former Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth affairs stated in its *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*: “Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, those from remote areas, refugees, homeless young people, and students with disabilities often experience educational disadvantage. Targeted support can help disadvantaged young Australians to achieve better educational outcomes. Australian governments must support all young Australians to achieve not only equality of opportunity but also more equitable outcomes.”¹⁹

Commonwealth, State and Territory governments have acknowledged the need to improve participation of students with disabilities. As noted earlier in this submission, it is now imperative that the array of school funding reforms:

- deliver equity
 - deliver supports that are seamless to navigate, irrespective of the complexity behind-the-scenes/machinery of government concerns.
- **Improve resourcing for student transitions – more time and support is needed for families, schools and specialist services to work together to thoroughly plan for key transitions, be that into primary school, secondary school, between schools, or post-school.**

¹⁸ For children who acquire a brain injury, the full extent of how the brain injury will impact them in the future isn't necessarily known at the time of injury. The impacts tend to emerge at different developmental stages, hence the importance of regular neuropsychological assessments.

¹⁹ Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (2008), *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*

Melbourne City Mission's response to Term of Reference (i):

The early education of children with disability

High quality, accessible early childhood services are critical parts of the education pathway for all children. For 'vulnerable' children – including children with developmental delays and children with disabilities – participation in parent/child groups (for example, playgroups), childcare, three-year-old kindergarten and four-year-old kindergarten provides protective factors and is correlated with positive transitions to school.

For many children with developmental delays or disabilities, Early Childhood Intervention Services (ECIS) play a key role in enabling participation in early years education, by supporting development, wellbeing and community participation. Areas of focus include communication and language, social and emotional skills, and fine and gross motor skills. Children who need ECIS supports, but miss out because they are not engaged with universal services such as Maternal and Child Health and are 'hard to reach', start school at a significant disadvantage relative to their peers.

Melbourne City Mission's approach is family-centred. An integral part of our work with children is establishing positive engagement with their family at the outset. A starting point is listening to the family and understanding where they are at – for example, their understanding of their child and any issues of grief and/or anxiety. If that initial step is not done well or with respect, it will impact our capacity to work with the child and the family and the effectiveness of the ECIS supports.

Melbourne City Mission steers away from a one-size-fits-all approach. Our ECIS services span individualised supports that can be flexibly delivered (for example, in the home or during a visit to the child's education setting), through to centre-based group programs (for example, weekly parent-child groups that run through the school year, through to time-limited 'block programs' that focus on the development of a discrete skill).

For many years, a significant issue for families has been the adequacy of support as their child transitions from early years education to school. Whilst ECIS workers undertake significant work to support the transition, families often feed back to us that:

- Their initial meetings with schools are negative – families particularly reflect on time constraints and perceive a lack of understanding and/or willingness to support the family (for example, some parents feel their children are regarded as a drain on the school's existing resources)
- They are overwhelmed by the various assessments and reports that must be completed for the Department of Education and Training, and feel that it is a negative process as it highlights only the deficits of their child.
- As a consequence of funding constraints, once their child starts school, some families feel forced to draw on their own finances to extend the supports required for their child.

Parents also find it difficult when their children transition from ECIS supports because ECIS incorporates family-centred practice – this is not the case in the school environment.

As noted earlier in this submission, Melbourne City Mission is pleased that, through the NDIS trial at Barwon, ECIS support periods have been extended, so that eligible children can continue to access their ECIS supports in their first few years at school (until age 8 instead of cutting out at school entry). However, additional strategies should be considered, and matched with resources, to improve primary school transition for students and families, as well as other key transition points.

Case Study – Kathy & Christopher

The following text is extracted from a letter written by a family accessing ECIS services at Norparrin, a program of Melbourne City Mission, and highlights the impact of ECIS supports as part of a pathway to education, as well as social inclusion.

**Names have been changed for privacy.*

“August 30th 2013 was the date my beautiful little boy was given the official diagnosis of severe Autism Spectrum Disorder. I shouldn’t have been shocked or surprised, I had known for a long time there was something “different” and “other” about Christopher and had even diagnosed him myself with ASD. Those official words broke my heart. Would all the dreams I had for my child ever come true? Would he ever live a “normal” life?

Those early weeks after diagnosis were a whirlwind of forms, interviews, professional appointments, forms, phone calls, blood tests and more forms. I’d been thrust into a world I wasn’t ready for and I felt lost, alone and frightened. My son’s future depended on me “getting it all right” and I feared I was letting him down.

In the midst of this chaos, I received a phone call that was to be the beginning of a great adventure. A place had become available at Norparrin and Christopher’s early intervention therapies would begin here.

Having grown up and lived in the northern suburbs all my life, I knew the name Norparrin but not what they did. Walking into the centre for the first time with Christopher, I could tell he thought he was in kid’s paradise! He was grinning from ear to ear, and one of the few words he could say which kept escaping his mouth was “wow!”

The toys and equipment at the centre, whilst fun had a much more serious purpose. It was time for Christopher to learn to communicate, socialise with peers and interact with others. Time for him to learn techniques to calm himself when the world became overwhelming and how to sit for five minutes and concentrate on one task. All of this was going to be hard work for him, but with the help of his first key worker at the centre, we came up with a plan and got to work.

We are now one year down the track and working with a new key worker and speech therapist at Norparrin. The changes in Christopher have been exciting to watch. His speech, while still limited, is improving daily and he now tells me, “I love you, mummy!” He can sit at a task until it’s completed and then high five the nearest person in triumph. He can name some colours, count to sixteen and recognise a few letters. He is learning to put his hands out when he falls, so that he doesn’t hurt himself too badly and that when a person cries, they’re sad and need a cuddle.

These things may seem trivial. To most of us, these actions come instinctively. Children with ASD need to be shown and then practice these skills, over and over until they ‘get it.’

Without the help and guidance of the remarkable therapists at Norparrin, I shudder to think what Christopher’s progress would’ve been like.

In the process of teaching him, they’ve been teaching me too. I’m learning who my son is; what he experiences; how he processes information and what I can do to help him. I often wonder if the “Norparrin Angels” really know what it is they are doing for parents.

Basically, they have given me, my child.

They’ve helped me to unlock a door and shown me a beautiful, magic world I like to call, Christopher.”

Conclusion

Although 2009 ABS data showed that children and young people with a disability had significantly higher rates of participation in school compared to those without a disability (82.1 per cent and 77 per cent respectively) – due to a higher proportion of children with disability staying in school longer – we also know that:

- There are students who are enrolled, but do not consistently attend school, for example, because of refusal or exclusion.
- There are students who only attend part-time because of gaps in specialist support
- *“Genuine participation and learning ... means more than just getting by”.*²⁰

Despite legislative protections, policies and standards, barriers to education participation persist. Whilst attitudinal barriers impact participation, the most significant handbrake is resourcing – both for schools and students. Students with disabilities – particularly those with complex behaviours – are being locked out of opportunity.

A more equitable funding system, which has at the centre needs-based funding, is vital to delivering on the rights of students with disabilities to participate in education on the same basis as their peers.

²⁰ Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (2012), *Held back: The experiences of students with disabilities in Victorian schools*, Melbourne