

21 April 2011

Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005  
Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations  
Location C50MA5  
GPO Box 9880  
CANBERRA ACT 2601

## **Re: Review of Disability Standards for Education 2005**

Carers NSW thanks the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations for the invitation to provide a submission into the Review of Disability Standards for Education 2005.

### **1. Introduction**

#### **1.1 About Carers NSW**

Carers NSW is the peak organisation for carers in NSW. It is a member of the national Network of Carers Associations and has an exclusive focus on supporting and advocating for all carers in the state.

The core work of Carers NSW is to:

- be the voice for carers in NSW
- undertake research, policy development and advocacy
- provide carer services and programs
- provide education and training for carers and services providers
- build capacity in the sector.

Carers NSW vision is that caring is accepted as a shared community responsibility and that all carers in NSW are recognised, valued and supported by their communities and by governments.

The goal of all of the work Carers NSW undertakes is for carers in NSW to have improved opportunities and access to services that meet their needs regardless of their age, gender, circumstances, location or cultural or linguistic background.

#### **1.2 Who Carers NSW represents**

Carers NSW defines a carer as any individual who provides unpaid care and support to a family member or friend who has a disability, mental illness, drug and alcohol dependencies, chronic condition, terminal illness or who is frail.

Carers come from all walks of life, cultural backgrounds and age groups. For many caring is a 24 hour job that is often emotionally, physically and financially stressful.

Across NSW there is an estimated 850,000 carers, comprising individuals as young as 8 years of age through to the very elderly.<sup>1</sup>

The ABS Survey of Disability Ageing and Carers in 2003 identified 95,900 persons aged 5-14 years with reported disability in NSW. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, approximately 58 per cent of people aged under 20 with disability had schooling restriction, meaning that they would require assistance because of their disability such as attending special classes at an ordinary school.<sup>2</sup>

In many cases people with disabilities who are engaging with the education system are supported by parent carer(s), yet there are also cases of grandparents, siblings, friends and children of people with disabilities acting as carers and supporting the person they care for in their studies.

### **1.3 Submission format**

This response addresses aspects of the Inquiry in regards to the perspective of carers of people with disabilities regarding access to education.

It is not the intention of Carers NSW to respond to all of the questions posed in the Inquiry.

## **2. Disability and Education**

Education determines not only a person's economic future but it is also important for a person's social and emotional development and establishing a sense of identity and a sense of place in the world.<sup>3</sup> The importance of education is even more pronounced in the case of a child with a disability, as it represents an important factor in creating an alternative future for a person with a disability and their social inclusion.

From the perspective of carers, education is also important as it provides a break from the caring role for parents and carers of people with disabilities. This is most often the case with children in primary and secondary education; however adult education and training programs can also provide important respite for carers.

Carers NSW supports changes to the education system to make it easier for students with disabilities to access and engage in education on the same basis as students without disabilities. Carers NSW acknowledges the role of the Disability Standards for Education in reducing discrimination against people with disability.

However, Carers NSW is also aware of the limitations of these standards in regard to improving the everyday reality faced by people with disabilities and their family and carers. In particular, Carers NSW believes the Standards need to be backed up with increased funding to support schools and other educational institutions in order to properly support students with disability. Currently, a school that accepts a student with a disability may not be adequately funded to allow the school to meet the student's needs without disadvantaging the student with a disability, other students or the school programs. For example, if a teacher doesn't have an appropriate teaching assistant, they may be forced to choose whether to spend more time with the student with a disability and limit the time spent with other students, or otherwise to minimise their support to the student with a disability so as not to disadvantage other students.

Carers also describe having to 'fight' for funding and risk this being lost if there are improvements in a student's performance.

RECOMMENDATION 1: Carers NSW recommends that increased funding be provided to support students with disabilities in the education system.

### 3. Carer Recognition

Carers play a crucial role in supporting education for the person with a disability, yet educational providers and staff often fail to appreciate their role. The roles played by carers in relation to the education of the person they are caring for include:

- transporting the individual to and from the institution
- emotional support and mentoring
- liaising with the school or institution
- advocating on behalf of the student
- assistance with career planning and goal setting.

The Commonwealth *Carer Recognition Act 2010*, which commenced in November 2010, contains a *Statement for Australia's Carers* which emphasises the rights of carers to respect and recognition of their role. Most important, it notes that 'carers should be considered as partners with other care providers in the provision of care, acknowledging the unique knowledge and experience of carers.'<sup>4</sup> It has been recognised that service providers who acknowledge the value of carers and work closely with carers provide better services to the person needing care.<sup>5</sup> This is as relevant to education providers as it is to health care providers. Families and carers are often the best informed party in regards to the needs and capabilities of the student with a disability and thus have a vital role to play in the planning of education provision to the student.

Communication between carers and staff is also a common problem reported to Carers NSW. In some cases, parents are not kept informed of what is being done for their child within the school, and may be anxious that they are not receiving the assistance they need. Not only does this unnecessarily increase the frustration and anxiety experienced by carers, it can also undermine or preclude the partnership that needs to be developed if the student is to receive the best education possible. Therefore, it is important that another key principle of the *Carer Recognition Act 2010*, that the relationship between carers and the persons for whom they care should be recognised and respected, is acknowledged by staff.

The Disability Standards for Education 2005 need to be modified in order to reflect the importance of carers and the potential for carers of people with a disability to also experience discrimination. Carers NSW recommends the Standards be modified to reflect the principles of the Commonwealth *Carer Recognition Act 2010* and the *Statement for Australia's Carers*.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Carers NSW recommends that the Standards be modified in order to recognise the important role of carers in supporting a person with a disability in the education system and the principles of the *Carer Recognition Act 2010* and the *Statement for Australia's Carers*.

### 4. Access and Discrimination

Carers NSW is particularly concerned with the discrimination faced by carers when trying to access education for the person they are caring for. Many carers report how stressful the experience of finding an appropriate school for their child can be. Families are often forced to look outside the local area to find schools with the appropriate support system and culture to cater to children with special needs. Those carers and families who send their child with disability to a mainstream school often struggle with a school culture that may be ignorant or fearful of students with special needs.

The discrimination experienced by carers and people with disabilities is partly due to a lack of awareness of the needs of students with disabilities, as well as a lack of skills and resources to support students with disabilities. As outline in section 2, there is a need for increased funding to help institutions to support students with disabilities.

However, in order to challenge ignorance regarding the needs of people with disabilities, Carers NSW recommends the roll-out of a training program for staff and providers of education in order to coincide with the release of the revised Disability Standards for Education. Carers NSW recommends the training program cover all types of disabilities including the needs of students with physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorders and mental illness. However, Carers NSW also recommends that the training include how potential barriers to learning can be overcome in order to provide a fulfilling learning experience.

**RECOMMENDATION 3:** Carers NSW recommends that the training in disability and carer awareness should be provided for staff in educational institutions across Australia.

## 5. Technology and education

There have been many developments in e-learning and technology to assist with education. Carers NSW recommends that innovations such as online learning be taken into account when considering how to facilitate access to education for students with special needs. For example, in some cases a student with disability may be unable to travel to the educational facility on a daily basis, and therefore would benefit from being able to listen to a recording of a lesson or lecture. Other examples include communication between teachers and students using Skype technology and voice activated software.

**RECOMMENDATION 4:** Carers NSW recommends that technology and e-learning be utilised in order to increase opportunities for people with disability to access education.

## 6. Conclusion

Carers NSW thanks the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations for the opportunity to comment on this Inquiry and welcomes its commitment to improve educational outcomes for students with disabilities or special needs. Carers NSW also wishes to thank the many carers who generously provided their input to this submission.

For any further information please contact Alison Parkinson on 02 9280 4744 or email [alisonp@carersnsw.asn.au](mailto:alisonp@carersnsw.asn.au).

Yours sincerely



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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011). *Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2009*, Sydney

<sup>2</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2009). *Disability in Australia: multiple disabilities and need for assistance*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Canberra, Cat. No. Dis 55

<sup>3</sup> Australian Government (2009). *Shut Out: the Experience of People with Disabilities and their Families in Australia*, National Disability Strategy Consultation Report, prepared by the National People with Disabilities and Carer Council, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra

<sup>4</sup> *Carer Recognition Act 2010*

<sup>5</sup> NSW Health (2007). *Carers Action Plan 2007-2012*, NSW Health, Sydney