

Shake-up for students with a disability

National definition to be a priority

The Age, Tuesday, February 14, 2012, by Jewel Topsfield

Federal minister Brendan O'Connor has flagged a major shake-up of funding for students with a disability, saying the government acknowledged it could do better.

Speaking ahead of the release of the Gonski report into school funding next week, Mr O'Connor said the current system lacks transparency, is unevenly applied and is bedevilled by different definitions of students with disability in each state and territory.

Mr O'Connor, who was appointed Minister Assisting for School Education late last year, told The Age the government would look at improving the way resources were provided to students with disabilities.

The minister, who will today open the inaugural meeting of the Schools Disability Advisory Council, said School Education Minister Peter Garrett had asked him to focus on disability in education. "It's an acknowledgement that we see this as a government priority," Mr O'Connor said.

Comparing the need for a national definition of students with disabilities to the "railway gauge debate". Mr O'Connor said the government must acknowledge it could do better.

"In school education there have been valiant efforts to dedicate support for students with disability, but I am not sure we have got it right," Mr O'Connor said. "There is very uneven application of funding, little transparency and great variation between the way people are funded in one jurisdiction compared to another."

Mr O'Connor said it was difficult for parents with students with a disability to move interstate because they didn't know what support they would be entitled to under different rules.

"Then there is the problem from the Commonwealth point of view of how to apply equitable funding when the definitions of disability are different."

The number of students with disabilities in Australia grew from 135,000 in 2005 to nearly 160,000 by 2008, according to research commissioned by the Gonski review.

The report by the Australian Council for Educational Research said data should be used with caution due to the lack of consistency across jurisdictions on the definition of students with disabilities.

South Australia, for example, included students with communication and language impairments, while other states and territories did not.

Reflecting these differences, the average enrolment of students with disabilities ranged from 3 per cent in Western Australia to 10.1 per cent in the Northern Territory. Victoria reported 4.5 per cent (38,109) of its students had a disability.

The report said a national working group was established last year to develop a uniform definition so as to aid in ensuring appropriate services are applied.

Mr O'Connor said today's meeting would be updated on the progress of the collection of nationally consistent data on students with disability. jtopsfield@theage.com.au

LIFESTYLE IN SUPPORTED ACCOMMODATION (LISA) INC.

Tel: 03-9434-3810: Email: info@lisainc.com.au or vk3qq@optusnet.com.au

Web: www.lisainc.com.au : www.lisa-aus.blogspot.com

NOTE: We are always interested in feedback and information; general, specific, good or bad.
If you wish anonymously: Our mail address is, 73 Nepean Street, Watsonia, 3087