

**Commissioner Alastair McEwin**

Thank you Chair.

Education was a very big topic at this Royal Commission. This is not surprising as many people told us that the human right to education is foundational to all other human rights.

Disabled people, their families, advocates, academics and others told us that education is “the start” and is a precursor to all people being included in all aspects of mainstream society: schools, workplaces, homes and community.

Parents of disabled children told this Royal Commission that they have the same aspirations for their children, just like other parents. One parent told us: “School is about maximising their potential. every child has a right to that.”

A re-occurring theme, particularly in the many private sessions I did, was the failure of the mainstream education system to include disabled children in their schools. I never had a parent tell me that they wanted their child to go to a “special” school. They told me repeatedly of their attempts to work with their local mainstream school to include their disabled child in the classroom and the school community.

I lost count of the many practical and easy solutions these families tried to implement with their local school, and the structural and attitudinal barriers they continued to face.

Many students and families gave up and felt they had no other choice than to go to a “special” school. A young advocate told us in a public hearing that mainstream schools are so inaccessible and so wrought with bullying that “it doesn’t feel like a choice anymore”.

We saw and read about ‘gate-keeping’, where teachers and principals told disabled children and their families that the local school couldn’t enrol them and that they would be better off going to a “special school”.

One disabled child and his family were told by a school that he would “slow down the class”.

We were told of the many different ways in which disabled students are pushed out of mainstream classroom, into segregated settings. And yet this is often referred to as “choosing” those settings.

We were also told about the low or no expectations of disabled children to learn and develop. There were many accounts of disabled children experiencing severe neglect in their education and social development.

In addition to the core right to education, we saw and read about the right for disabled children to have access to their linguistic and cultural identities. The Deaf community told this Royal Commission of the importance of Deaf children receiving their education in sign language. They told us of the negative and devastating life-long impacts of language deprivation.

We also were also told by First Nations people with disability of the importance of having their cultural rights recognised. They told us this can be achieved by having First Nations disabled and non-disabled children learning together in a culturally appropriate way.

Thousands of people, whether in public hearings, submissions or private sessions were very clear to on what needs to change. That mainstream schools need to be inclusive of all children.

Inclusive education gives all children the opportunity to develop understanding, knowledge and empathy of each other. This leads to a greater acceptance of disability as part of the diversity of society.

We saw and read, that for inclusive education to work no child should be turned away from a mainstream school and that solutions for inclusion should be found.

Many solutions for inclusive education were provided to this Royal Commission, solutions which have already been implemented in some schools in Australia with success.

Just three of these simple yet powerful solutions are:

- a fully inclusive school in Townsville, where no child was turned away on the basis of disability, regardless of support needs;
- an autism coach in every primary school in South Australia, to support teachers to ensure their practices are inclusive; and
- the Queensland government's education policy which references the principles of Inclusive Education articulated by Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability and General Comment No.4.

The reform agenda for governments to implement inclusive education needs to be true to the non-segregationist spirit and intent of the Convention. That is, mainstream education settings are to be inclusive of all children and the default placement for them.

The reform agenda for mainstream schools to be inclusive should, at its core, be about learning and development for all children. The agenda is therefore not solely about disability – it is about universal design and access, for all.

In bringing this to an end, I say two things.

First, I thank each person who provided their experiences and information to the Royal Commission. Your contributions have been invaluable to our work.

Second and finally, I have a vision of Australia having a fully inclusive education system, where there is only one education setting with no dual and segregated settings of mainstream and special schools.

*[interrupted by spontaneous applause from the crowd.]*

Just one thing if I may ... I saw and felt the pain of thousands of missed opportunities for disabled children who were, and continue to be, excluded from learning with their non-disabled peers. And I saw and felt the pain of these children and their families who had tried so hard to be included in the mainstream system, only to be dismissed and excluded by that system that did not welcome them.

My hope as a disabled person, is that in the near future every mainstream school welcomes all children, disabled and non-disabled. It is my hope that every mainstream school provides learning and development for each individual child. Until this happens, we will never achieve a fully inclusive society that embraces disability as part of the diversity of our community.