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JOINT MEDIA STATEMENT

Leading specialists in inclusion and disability have called for an urgent overhaul of legislation and policy, after evidence to the Disability Royal Commission highlighted a broken education system that enables too many young people to leave school without basic skills.

Learning Difficulties Australia, Inclusive Educators Australia and Autism Awareness Australia have released an unprecedented joint statement, condemning a culture of low expectations surrounding children and teenagers with disabilities, learning difficulties and additional needs.

It follows the Royal Commission's latest round of hearings, held in Canberra this month, which revealed that students with disabilities were routinely being let down by a widespread lack of support across both mainstream and specialist schools.

The organisations are urging Commissioners to consider a range of recommendations, including:

- Legislation and policy reforms to protect disabled students' human right to an inclusive education.
- Greater accountability for student learning and robust data collection on student progress.
- A review of the current concentration of resources in special schools to ensure all students with disability, regardless of where they go to school, have equitable access to specialist support.
- Amending professional standards for school leaders, teachers and allied health professionals and introducing standards for support staff, such as teaching aides.

Inclusive Educators Australia co-founder Loren Swancutt said evidence presented to the Royal Commission suggested a misconception existed in some parts of the community that some people, due to the complexity of their disability, were beyond support.

One witness to the Royal Commission, the father of a young man called Ryan, revealed that he had aspired for his son to learn to write his name and be able to count. Yet Ryan left school unable to do either. Having also failed to develop robust communication skills, he is now hospitalised and sedated for up to 20 hours per day.

“It’s been devastating to hear stories of young people graduating from school without having acquired the basic skills of literacy, numeracy, or having received appropriate communication support,” Ms Swancutt said.

“Just as concerning, however, is that one impression that might be formed from testimony presented to the Commissioners, is that some students do not have the capacity to learn or be included at their local school; that low expectations of them are justified.

“As professionals and experts, we know that this is absolutely not the case.”

Learning Difficulties Australia council member Dr Kate de Bruin, also a senior lecturer in inclusive education at Monash University, said all young people were entitled to quality education and support tailored to their requirements.

She said some students with disability would require more intensive support to acquire skills, while those with complex communication support needs would additionally benefit from allied health input, such as specialist services and access to augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) options.

“It is not necessary for students to attend a special school to access any of these supports – these can all be implemented in mainstream schools,” Dr de Bruin said.

“In fact, research shows this group make significantly greater gains when they are supported to learn in inclusive settings.”

Dr Roslyn Neilson, Secretary of Learning Difficulties Australia, noted the difficulty this created for families: “On one hand, their local mainstream school may lack the resources or the capacity to deliver a high-quality and inclusive education for students with a disability. On the other hand, choosing a special school can reduce the benefits of their child’s full participation in society.”

Autism Awareness Australia Chief Executive Officer Nicole Rogerson said witness testimonies had highlighted the need for urgent change.

“At the moment, families face an impossible choice when it comes to educating their children with additional needs,” she said.

“We need laws, policies, teacher and allied health education programs and funding models that work in harmony across all parts of the system to support all students to receive a quality and inclusive education, without exception.”

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