



*Background Paper to
Education Inquiry Submission*

This paper outlines the background and main points submitted in a 356 page document which is attached as Appendix 1. Appendix 1 is structured as a timeline and is the personal experiences, witnessed accounts and documented evidence of over 20+ individuals who had an educational relationship either professionally or as a parent at Latrobe Special Developmental School (LSDS).

The submission is submitted by Voices for Special Needs (VFSN) on behalf of consortium members. Members for VFSN further request an opportunity to present at a regional inquiry hearing.

The submission is set out as a timeline and begins with incidents in 2006. This submission is a 'living document' and captures what we deem a historical culture, encompassing practices of seclusion, physical violence, sexual assaults, restraint, neglect, bullying, nepotism, non-compliance of the Child Safety Act, standards, policy and code of conduct and more specifically human right violations at LSDS.

In response to the Education Inquiry Terms of Reference, VFSN draws specific attention to the following items, recommendations made are driven from evidence outlined in Appendix 1;

(2) the state of the teaching profession in Victoria, including but not limited to —

(a) the adequacy of existing measures to recruit and retain teachers;

1. Current recruiting measures within the identified school are established with nepotism and lacking adequate qualifications and experiences.
2. Draw attention to VFSN complaint submitted to VRQA 8 November 2021 raising concerns about the adequate qualifications of the staff member appointed to the position of the State funded Tutor program that rolled out in response to COVID complexities.
3. **Professional Development:** many staff do not complete PD, accreditation sign off needs to return to Central office rather than school based leadership.

(b) training, accreditation and professional development, particularly for teaching students with special needs;

1. **Understanding the Importance of Regulation, communication and behavioural strategies:** within the social school setting a greater emphasis needs to be placed on understanding the "importance" of regulation, communication systems and behavioural strategies in order to successfully engage students with disabilities. There is far too greater emphasis on meeting academic requirements.
2. **National Restrictive Practice Guidelines** there are too many discrepancies and gaps between State and Federal practices and even greater differences between school practices, as one parents describes "chalk and cheese" between 2 different special school practices.
3. **Stronger Mandatory Reporting Requirements including engagement plans/strategies with those affected:** if family had of been informed and engaged in knowing what had happened to their children they would be better placed to support their children. Instead families are kept in the dark and often left to deal with regressive behaviours/new behaviours with no context to why. Families who file FOI's have them returned severely redacted, again not allowing for explanation to what has happened.
4. **Mandatory reporting of incidences** to parents for them to sign off, i.e.: same as early childhood education practices+ better transparency
5. **Sexualised Behavioural Practitioners that specialise in working with special needs/disability (not teachers):** need to be implemented/accessible for Special Schools. This is a very difficult and complex topic to discuss and educate special needs children, especially non-verbal and those with intellectual disabilities.

6. **Specialised Behavioural practitioners employed in all Special schools**
7. **Mandatory “Behavioural Support Plans” for students with at risk behaviours** and this should include communication and transparency between families as well. Staff also need to be trained in understanding the impacts trauma can have on top of disability.

VFSN have sort many avenues to have these voices of these most vulnerable children heard and taken seriously and members have attempted to liaise and seek assistance from the Department of Education and Training (DET), however support has not been given and/or individuals have been dismissed. It is fair to say trust towards DET is non-existent and there are also concerns regarding the bureaucratic leadership within this department from a local level all the way into central office.

I also draw your attention to the WebEx 20/10/2020 cage fight incident that gained State-wide publicity; yet despite the publicity; the staff in question still remain teaching at LSDS today. A matter that perplexes families deeply.

There are many incidents identified with Appendix 1 that highlight lack off, poor to non-existence in leadership within the said school and region.

(d) the impact of school leadership on student wellbeing, learning outcomes and school culture;

The Appendix encapsulates the following practices and behaviours of leadership, staff and culture at LSDS:

- historical and continual use of physical restraint and violence towards student’s, including alleged incidents of adult staff members kicking, dragging, pulling, and pushing students
- alleged incidents of adult staff members teasing and ridiculing children
- alleged incidents of children being locked out of classrooms, or locked into other rooms or the top paddock (unsupervised)
- criminal and sexual assault incidents gone unreported and/or unsupported;
- witnessed accounts of grooming;
- breach of disability rights via defamation;
- human right’s violations pertaining to severe seclusion;
- human right’s violation pertaining to racial victimisation;
- breaches in restrictive practices;
- safety of students pertaining to physical and environmental non- compliance /breaches;
- toxic and divisional staff culture resulting in bullying, harassment and nepotism school environment;
- insufficient leadership within the school and the department’s role in over- seeing compliance and regulation of child safety within this school environment;
- the neglect and failure to implement required practices of communication systems and occupational therapy strategies to support student regulation and engagement success; and
- educational practices in learning and development are not at best practice standards.

Recommendations include;

1. **CCTV needs to be installed on Special Schools Buses and in ALL Special Schools:** this would especially give a voice to the voiceless. There is sadly a perception amongst some people that work with those with a disability that they are liars and “often” deemed, ‘they get things mixed up or confused’. Having CCTV would install truth and eliminate workers, who really shouldn’t be there; as those doing the right thing would be more than happy to support a strategy that supports and protects children with special needs.
2. **Independent Integrity Authority** made up of people with a disability or lived experience of those living with disabilities, that are trained in legislative requirements, to oversee compliance of State Government Departments= removing departments having powers to investigate themselves/employee external companies to do same. Issues with VRQA.
3. **Evidence based communication responses to parental inquires within a fair/reasonable time frame**

4. Benched marked “Communication Policy with Parent’s specifically for children with disabilities” as it is far to inconsistent and obsolete
5. Overhaul of the so called “Special Education Unit” within DET as families do not know it exists or understand its functions/capacities

VFSN is still deeply concerned and has been advocating for over 3 years now, and at one point meet with representatives from the Department of Education calling for the highest of independent inquiries, seeking and calling for a *judicial inquiry into LSDS* and continues to seek avenues to raise concerns especially about the welfare of current students at LSDS, as many of the staff outlined in the document still remain within LSDS.

(3) the current state of student wellbeing in Victoria, including but not limited to the impact of State Government interventions, following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, to address poor mental health in students, school refusal, and broader student disengagement;

1. **Disengagement from school:** VFSN is aware of many students with disabilities disengaged from school and hiding at home in their room, due to severe experiences of treatment with school settings or even witnessing severe incidents. In many cases, students with disabilities are now living with trauma on top of their disability. Recommendations outlined above would help support students better.
2. **There should be NO Zoning of school bus eligibility for Special Needs students and companions,** families that have had to leave LSDS are now faced with exuberant transport costs, forced to travel to either Sale or Warragul for alternative school based education. Educational options for those with a severe disability are limited.
3. **Behavioural supports, trauma supports:** there needs to be resourcing of these qualifications within school, emphasis on intervention models- mental health is the outcome of not supporting or addressing issues/behaviours of concern.
4. **Commission for Children & Young People:** CCYP need to have stronger powers. Rather than making recommendations they need to have the power to enforce changes to policy and procedure. CCYP need to have greater powers than give them the ability to enact accountability, transparency and benchmark/ best practice standards across the department/staff.

VFSN integrity lies in truth.