



# There's small choice in rotten apples



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Queensland Parents for  
People with a Disability

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**An exploration of the  
process of parental  
decision-making around  
educational choice for  
parents of children with  
disabilities.**

NOVEMBER 2003

## **Queensland Parents for People with a Disability**

QPPD is a statewide systems advocacy organisation established in 1981. QPPD conducted a number of advocacy ventures by parents during the 1980's covering issues including family support and respite, education, quality lifestyles for adults and guardianship. Since 1990 QPPD has been federally funded under the Commonwealth Disability Services Act (1986) to do statewide systems advocacy on behalf of people with disabilities. QPPD's mission is:

**QPPD vigorously defends justice and rights for people with disabilities by exposing exclusionary practices, speaking out against injustices and promoting people with disabilities as respected, valued and participating members of society.**

In addition to this systems advocacy focus, QPPD continues to develop a wide membership of families and friends across Queensland who remain in contact with the organisation. As well as personally supporting one another, these families take up issues collectively on behalf of sons, daughters and others, speaking out against injustices and promoting people with disabilities as valued and participating members of society.

### **QPPD's advocacy principles**

Advocacy is speaking, acting, writing with minimal conflict of interest on behalf of the sincerely perceived interests of a disadvantaged person or group to promote, protect and defend their welfare and justice by:

- Being on their side and no-one else's
- Being primarily concerned with their fundamental needs
- Remaining loyal and accountable to them in a way which is emphatic and vigorous and which is, or is likely to be, costly to the advocate or the advocacy group.

### **QPPD's beliefs about education for students with disabilities**

- We know students with disabilities are important because they are people first, regardless of the nature of their disabilities. In order to achieve a valued life in their families and local communities they need to be a part of regular educational services, but may need extra supports and assistance in order to participate fully.
- We also know students with disabilities are at risk of being labelled, abused, exploited, neglected or rejected. Because of this, educators will often attempt to provide for their needs in specialised places away from other students and with different cultural and social norms. Such placements can be offered as the first and only option, rather than as the last.
- We believe students with disabilities can develop and learn and should be encouraged to lead typical, ordinary lives with possibilities for a decent adulthood. Real lives are more likely to be achieved with children growing up together.
- We also believe that all students need educators with positive attitudes to counteract society's prejudices so that they are able to achieve their rights and entitlements as students and valued citizens of Australia.

### **QPPD's recent work around education**

In May 2001, QPPD published a report based on the findings of a phone in conducted in February 2001 on Education Queensland's placement policy. This report was instrumental in bringing about the current period of review, which has included Education Queensland state-wide focus groups leading to the Summit on Inclusive Education held in May 2002, the Ministerial Taskforce on Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities, the revision of services and programs through the Action Plan, a review of ascertainment and the assurance that the placement policy will be replaced with a common enrolment policy. QPPD also provided a submission to the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities and was subsequently called to appear as a witness at the hearing in Brisbane on 6th September 2002.

## Foreword

Education is a basic and often taken for granted feature of our lives. Education sets us on the path to our future. What we learn at school about life and humanity is pivotal in how we conduct ourselves as adults, how we relate to others and how we contribute to society. The educational choices parents make today will forever impact on their child's life.

When disability is the basis upon which life-defining decisions are made, options become limited and expectations are lowered. As parents of children with disabilities we have the right to expect more of the education system than their automatic segregation and narrowed opportunities. The label does not make the child, their strengths, talents or unique personality. Why should the label determine the present or predict their future?

Among all the constraints of the education system, parents must choose the basis on which their child's future will be built. This report contributes to the much-needed understanding of why they make the choices they do and uncovers more of the constraints that are imposed on parental choice.

An education system that coerces parents into making negative choices is a system that condemns children with disabilities into lifetimes of segregation, congregation and dependency. I urge all those who read this report to consider its drastic implications – the entire orchard is at stake.



Roz Cooper  
President

QPPD acknowledges the support of the following people and extends thanks for their participation and valued contribution to the choice research:

The members of the steering committee, Fiona Connolly, Sandra Kalms, Anne Leahy, Glenys Mann, Michelle O'Flynn, Anita Speed, Phil Tomkinson and Lynn Walmsley

The various organisations who distributed flyers and leaflets for the survey and focus groups.

The focus group facilitator, Dr Lesley Chenoweth.

The research project worker, Sharyn Pacey, who coordinated the project and wrote the report.

Dr Marie Knox and Sandi Seymour who provided valuable feedback and guidance on the process.

QPPD staff members, Sally Barone, Sandra Kalms, Stephanie Pratt, Anita Rooney.

Our thanks and appreciation go to all the people who participated in the research, for sharing with us the experiences of your families.

***“I regard the right to choose, invested in parents regarding the education of their children, as one of the most sacred rights”***  
(Prime Minister, Mr John Howard, Hansard Nov 2000)

***“The one thing that is paramount is the choice of parents”***  
(Queensland Minister for Education, The Hon. Anna Bligh, in her opening address to the Forum on Inclusive Education, May 2002)

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## Executive Summary

This report details the results of research conducted by QPPD on the process of decision-making around educational choice by parents of students with disabilities. A written survey was conducted in May 2003 and a series of focus groups was held in June 2003. QPPD received 247 responses to the survey and 26 people participated in the focus groups.

The evidence from this research indicates that:

- Parents of students with disabilities want the same things from education as all parents.
- Parents of students with disabilities are offered a range of options for the education of their child, but there is no real choice; the actual experience of the parents in this study indicates that the notion of choice is an illusion.
- It is difficult to take the option which is not recommended by EQ, parents feel that they are punished for insisting on inclusion, whereas the recommended option, laden with the incentives of resources, therapy, transport and other supports is sometimes very hard to resist.

The key findings of this report are:

- The majority of students with disability attend school at an SEU or special school and do not attend the same school as their siblings.
- Parents said that their child would not be at the school they currently attend if they did not have a disability and the advice and information given to them by teachers, school officials and other professionals is often biased towards segregated education pathways and strongly influences the decision-making process.
- Parents want their child to be challenged to learn, be safe, happy and valued.
- A consequence of choice for some parents of children with disability is greater economic constraints.
- In the choice of a school, families sometimes make many life-changing decisions.
- Ascertainment and the placement policy limit options for the choice of school.
- The attitude of the school community toward their child is the strongest influence on school choice.
- A consequence of choice was often a lack of stability for the family.
- Part-time placement or other forms of exclusions and suspension exert great influence over parental choice.
- Families suffer emotional distress, strain and stress as a consequence of the notion of choice.

This research indicates that many parents had no real options to choose from, others had unsuccessfully worked through a range of

***This research exposes the non-sense of the notion of choice for parents of students with disability.***

options or had been encouraged to make particular choices. QPPD can conclude that while parents were, in all instances, bending over backwards in their efforts to find the right place for their child, for many parents of children with disability the right to choose the school their child attends is illusory.

While the evidence from this research clearly applies only to the particular groups of people, who participated in the survey and the focus groups, the findings are nonetheless significant and important in their implications for the debate around choice. This research demonstrates that choice for the majority of the participants was a very complex issue, constrained by factors which most other families do not experience. It also highlights that the policy and guidelines currently in development by Education Queensland are not consistent with the practice which families encounter.

The findings in this report detail the sometime unproductive, often frustrating and sadly demoralising struggle which many students with disabilities and their families experience through the education system, the limited or few prospects and the lifelong implications of this for those students.

Queensland Parents for People with a Disability asks Education Queensland to consider the issues raised by this report.

- What is EQ saying about the human value and potential of students with disabilities if they are not providing them with the same choices as all students? QPPD reiterates that key elements of education that all parents seek for their children are being challenged to learn, to be safe, happy and valued. Parents of children with disabilities do not seek different outcomes for their children, so why offer them different choices?
- ‘Expert advice’ exerts a strong influence on the decision-making process for most people. If this advice originates from those with a vested interest in ‘special education’ – for example, SEDU teachers, guidance officers, therapists, it appears to lead parents along the segregated education pathway more often than not. How can Education Queensland justify the promotion of education in segregated settings, when its own policies state that inclusion is central to effective schooling? How does EQ ensure that special educators implement its policies by positively promoting and practically supporting inclusive education? How can special education expertise be best used in an inclusive education system?
- How does EQ allocate its resources? Are maximum resources allocated to support students with disabilities in regular schools to enable their full participation in education?
- How can EQ motivate schools communities to develop flexible and inclusive responses to enable all students within the community to realise their potential?
- How are new and existing teachers being skilled to teach to diversity? The lack of assessment and curricular modification points to the need to develop and modify curriculum

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frameworks which reflect the diversity of educational needs and that teachers receive pre and in-service training in this area.

- How does EQ demonstrate and foster leadership to assist school communities to behave in a welcoming and supportive way as an expression of a positive and inclusive attitude? How is the commitment to inclusive education expressed in EQ policy and guidelines? What progress has EQ made on the development of a common enrolment policy?
- Why should families of students with disabilities be forced to live in a state of flux brought about by the inequity of 'choice'? QPPD acknowledges the cost borne by families and suggests that the notion of choice affects this cost significantly.

This research exposes the non-sense of the notion of choice for parents of students with disability. This current study confirms that students with disability and their families are actually given little choice and that what is on offer fails to provide students with disabilities opportunities to develop, learn and grow. Choice can be seen to be imposing additional restrictions, reducing, sometimes removing options and resulting in fewer opportunities for personal growth and development.

***What is EQ saying about the human value and potential of students with disabilities if they are not providing them with the same choices as all students?***





## Rationale for this research

QPPD has undertaken this research exploring parental decision-making in response to a perceived commitment on behalf of the Queensland Government to retain segregated settings for people with disabilities on the grounds that parents need and want that choice. This report details the results of this research and seeks to expose and clarify some of the issues around educational choice for parents of children with disabilities.

The data in this research has been collected using two different methods applied to the same subject in explicit relation to each other. A written survey (appendix A) was conducted to elicit quantitative data around parental choice in the education of children with disabilities and then a small number of focus groups, composed of survey respondents, was conducted. The survey group was self-selecting and drawn from parents who had previously been involved in QPPD's research around the Placement Policy, QPPD's membership, members of other parent support organisations and all schools within selected school districts. The focus groups were conducted as discussion groups, using certain prompt questions to focus the discussions. Their format was one of narrative enquiry and the responses have not been used to validate the survey data, rather to provide confidence in the conclusions drawn from the survey data and to contribute qualitative data which would illuminate and add depth to the analysis. (Appendix B)

In previous research by QPPD, parental choice in the decision-making process around selecting a school for children with disability was identified as being critical but vexed in nature. While 'choice' was ostensibly on offer to parents, it was neither encouraged nor actively promoted in the process. Parents, who exercised their right to choose a particular school, often did so in a negative, unwilling and unhelpful climate.<sup>1</sup>

The objective of this research is to explore the process of parental decision-making around educational choice for parents of children with disabilities, to investigate how the policies and practices of Education Queensland affect this process and to identify and examine the impact and relevance of this process on families, students, schools and community.

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<sup>1</sup> Education Queensland's Placement Policy and Process: A Report. Queensland Parents for People with a Disability Inc 2001

## What do we mean by choice?

**choice** | ts | n. ME.  
[OFr. *chois* (mod. *choix*) f. *choisir* choose, f. Proto-Gallo-Romance f. Gmc base of CHOOSE.]

**1** Choosing, deciding between possibilities; a necessity to choose, a selection. ME.

**2** The power, right, or faculty of choosing; option. ME.

**3** A person or thing (to be) specially chosen or selected; the elite; the best of a group etc.; the pick. LME.

**4** Variety and abundance to choose from; a scope or field of possibilities. L16. **b** An abundant and well-chosen supply. L16. **5** Care in choosing, judgement, discrimination. L16-M18.

**6** Special value, estimation. rare (Shakes.). Only in E17.

**7** An alternative. L18.

Excerpted from *Oxford Interactive Encyclopedia*.  
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The definition of choice indicates that it is the act of making a preferential determination between two or more proposals and that this act conveys certain power and rights to the person performing that act. There can be no doubt that choice is considered one of the most powerful rights human beings possess, defining every step of our lives; if we make 'good' choices, we enable ourselves to grow and develop, to realise our potential and to fulfil our own destiny; conversely the 'bad' choices we make limit our growth and development and waste our potential. Life is made up of many acts of choosing, both 'good' and 'bad' and we measure how these acts affect us with the yardsticks of self-fulfilment, self-determination and from our interaction with and the perception of others.

All of us who become parents find ourselves also making choices for others – our children; this represents a profound responsibility for most parents, for those choices shape the future of our children. In attempting to make choices for our children, we must also be mindful of the influences on the process.

We consider not only the best interests of our child, but also what is in our own interests and the interests of the family unit. We take into account the cultural, social and economic influences in which we live or in which we expect or would like our children to live. As parents, we choose the culture in which we want our children to grow and develop; their spiritual lives, their sense of community, their abilities and their values are set within this cultural framework. In this process of choosing, our children develop the skills and the knowledge to participate in those decisions, so that by the latter stages of the formal education process, the child makes many of those decisions in consultation with parents, whereas certainly at the initial stages of schooling the child will probably have little or no participation in the process.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that

*“parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children”<sup>2</sup>*

Both the Australian Federal and State of Queensland Governments have indicated that the parental right to choose the school which their child/ren attend is regarded as an inalienable right.

*“I regard the right to choose, invested in parents regarding the education of their children, as one of the most sacred rights”*  
(Prime Minister, Mr John Howard, Hansard Nov 2000)

At the Summit on Inclusive Education held in Brisbane in May 2002, the Minister for Education, the Hon. Anna Bligh expressed surprise at the constrained choice of parents of students with disability and went on to say:

*“The one thing that is paramount is the choice of*

<sup>2</sup> Universal Declaration of Human Rights Adopted and proclaimed by General Assembly resolution 217 A (III) of 10 December 1948, Article 26 (3).

parents” (Queensland Minister for Education, The Hon. Anna Bligh, in her opening address to the Forum on Inclusive Education, May 2002)

These statements about choice suggest that it is a relatively simple concept, whereas we would argue that choice is extremely complex. Choices are not made in a vacuum and most people’s options are dependent upon many different elements; our personal, economic and environmental circumstances, external influences, personal expectations and values limit how we make decisions. We live in a world of constrained choice. This study outlines some of the elements that constrain the choices of parents of students with disabilities and the effects of these constraints.

While QPPD would not necessarily argue against the premise that parental choice is desirable, there are limits to the argument for choice.

Firstly, not all people are given options to choose from. Parents of children with disabilities often have to go through the decision-making process more often and subject to more direction, so that they actually have to make more decisions with fewer options.


Secondly, we would argue that parents of children with disabilities do not have the same choices as parents of children without disabilities and it is this different set of options which determine the educational choices for children with disabilities.

And thirdly, by giving parents of children with disabilities a different set of choices, we might be operating from the false assumption that what those parents want for their children is in some way different from the expectations parents generally have.

These, then, are some additional limitations on the choices and decisions of parents when choosing a school for their child with disabilities, which may have a significant impact on the decision-making process.

***It is not merely a contingent fact about human beings that they must be educated in one way or another, and that this education will forever shape their future selves. It is, also, a profound metaphysical fact that freedom is necessarily constrained. If we did not bring values and expectations to our choices, we would have no basis upon which to make them.”***

***Levy, Neil, “Deafness, Culture and Choice”. In Journal of Medical Ethics. 28 (5). Oxford, UK, BMJ Publishing. 2002. pp284-285***



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**“The argument that choice will bring greater diversity mistakes what we want from public services. Most parents want the same things from a school: a secure environment in which their children can develop their talents with motivated staff, not too far from home”.**

Denny, Charlotte, in *The Guardian*, Monday 18 August 2003.

**Choosing a secondary school is an important decision for parents and students. In trying to select the best school for your son/daughter, you will want to consider the following: Will my child be safe and happy? Will the talents of my child be harnessed, developed and rewarded? Will my child be provided with experiences and learnings to prepare him/her for a successful future?**

A Message From The Principal,  
Corinda State High School  
Prospectus 2004

## So what do families want?

Do parents of children with disabilities really want the ‘greater diversity’ of special schools and special education units? Or do parents choose the segregated setting of a special school or special education unit because the mainstream education system in its current form and with its current methodology is not seen to be encouraging an inclusive and flexible response to the educational needs of many of our children in today’s societal climate. What other factors influence parents of students with disabilities when selecting a school for their son or daughter with a disability?

One of the factors influencing what families want is what their expectations are; people make choices based on their expectations – what were the expectations parents had before their child/ren went to school? Were these expectations fulfilled by the school system? Parental expectations generally include wanting our children to achieve their potential and this is closely linked to the personal life situation in which the child finds itself. The personal life experiences of parents, family and friends would form a crucial part of these expectations.

Parents also want their children to be challenged, recognising that challenge is a catalyst for further personal development. Parents expect their child to be exposed to a learning environment, in which curricular and extra-curricular opportunity would enable their child to reach different milestones of achievement – acquiring the ability to read and write, developing interests and hobbies, learning to recognise their individual skills and abilities and developing pathways to employment, apprenticeship and further learning opportunity such as TAFE and university.

Parents want schools to provide a safe and caring environment which fosters and develops the principles of positive social interaction, promoting the importance of community involvement, belonging and friendship. Parents want the school community to be welcoming and accepting, to be open to learning about their child. Parents also recognise that schools play an important part in shaping and informing our future societal environment and parents expect schools to discharge this powerful responsibility attentively and to be enthusiastic, though mindful, about the opportunities for positive social change which the school system possesses.

Schools themselves, in their own prospectuses, recognise that these are the common expectations of all parents when choosing a school.<sup>3</sup>

Previous QPPD research has shown that parents will often turn for guidance to various sources about which school might match their expectations for their child and their family. Parents are influenced by word of mouth, staff within the system, other professional advice, other parents and friends, community organisations, the community perception of a school, marketing, advertising, their own investigations and comparisons with other schools.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> A Message From The Principal, Corinda State High School Prospectus 2004

<sup>4</sup> Education Queensland’s Placement Policy and Process: A Report. Queensland Parents for People with a Disability Inc 2001

## What do schools say they offer?

Nowadays schools promote themselves to attract enrolments in a variety of ways; they hold open days in which they showcase the positive educational achievements of the school students; schools advertise in newspapers and magazines, they present material in glossy marketing brochures, they liaise with community groups to develop the cultural and community life of the school outside of the school gates and for the positive benefit of the wider community, often with a focus of a particular disadvantaged group. While private schools have always used some of these promotional methods, state schools too are adopting these strategies.

State schools and Education Queensland represent our schools as communities in which certain principles for school admission apply:

- *Equity*
- *Consistency*
- *Transparency*
- *And individual choice within a systemic framework*<sup>5</sup>

Once admitted to this community, students, their families, teachers and staff will share in, contribute to and build the collaborative spirit of this community to which they now belong. All Queensland state schools offer opportunities for parents to join a Parents and Citizens Association.<sup>6</sup> Many schools have school councils and community participation officers to foster and encourage parental and community involvement.<sup>7</sup>

Education Queensland represents the new model for schools as places of civic participation and community partnerships, with “*productive partnerships with their community and with business, industry and other government agencies*”<sup>8</sup>, preparing students for life by shaping their values, providing students with future skills, educating the whole person in an accepting, cohesive and positive environment and ideally shaping students to be ready for life.

One local high school in Brisbane has this motto on signs outside the school:

*Together we will*

- *Enrich relationships*
- *Ignite potential*
- *Explore new frontiers*


*“Your way to a brighter future”.*

<sup>5</sup> *Education Queensland, SM-19 Admissions Policy*, <http://education.qld.gov.au/corporate/doem/studemansm-19000/sections/procedur.htm#3.1>

<sup>6</sup> <http://education.qld.gov.au/corporate/pandc/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://education.qld.gov.au/schools/about/html/es-parent.html> however It must be stated here that QPPD has many examples of parents of students with disabilities being ‘overlooked’, not being given the same information as other parents and often finding that they are not welcome on school committees or even on school property.


<sup>8</sup> *Destination 2010: The action plan to implement Queensland State education – 2010*, The State of Queensland (Department of Education) 2002, revised 2003. P10.



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**We provide high quality education that makes a positive difference to the lives of all Queenslanders. We equip young people for the future to enable them to contribute to a socially, economically and culturally vibrant society.**

Destination 2010: The Action Plan to Implement Queensland State Education—2010, The state of Queensland (Department of Education) 2002, revised 2003, p4





While these are admirable ideals for the education system to embrace, for many parents and students the reality of their school experience falls far short of this. Many schools, while embracing these ideals in principle, will struggle with the many competing factors and demands of a real community. For many students, not only students with disabilities, and their families the school experience is one of impoverished relationships, unrealised potential with few or no new frontiers to explore and a gloomy prognosis for the future.

**“The central purpose of schooling in Queensland – that is, to prepare young people to be active citizens in a learning society – is served by equipping students with the skills and knowledge – cognitive and cultural, social and linguistic – that have power and salience in the world.”**

Years 1-10 Curriculum  
Framework for Education  
Queensland Schools (2001)



## How the survey research was conducted

The survey (see Appendix A) was sent out in May 2003 to

- all the participants of the QPPD phone-in, conducted in 2001,
- all state and private schools within three education districts in Queensland,
- QPPD members and
- community organisations who were requested to publicise the research through their networks.

247 completed surveys were received, representing a response rate of 11%.

### Survey Research: Who were the respondents

The majority of respondents were in the 36 to 45 and 46 + years of age bracket (77%).

|                                  |       |
|----------------------------------|-------|
| Families with one child          | 5.5%  |
| Families with 2 children         | 38.5% |
| Families with 3 children         | 26.5% |
| Families with 4 or more children | 29.5% |

The table above, showing family sizes of the respondents, indicates that the sample is broadly representative of general population statistics.<sup>9</sup>

Of the 247 respondents, 58% advised that their own education had proceeded to end of year 12 (20%) or to tertiary level (38%). In answer to the survey question asking parents to indicate the age of their child with disability, 85% indicated that their child was in the 6 to 18 years of age bracket, in other words, of school age, with 34% in the primary school age group, 34% in the junior school level and 17% at senior school level.

Parents were also asked to state the position of their child with disability in their family. Only .06% of the survey respondents indicated that they had one child only and .08% gave no response to this question; of the remaining respondents 39% indicated that their child with disability was their first child and 37% their second child.

Three quarters of those surveyed educated their children within the public education system.

Parents will often seek advice on school choice, in particular at entry level to primary and secondary schooling. When asked who influenced their choice, survey respondents identified three spheres of influence, friends and family, other parents and experts, which includes teaching staff, special education development unit (SEDU) teaching staff, other school-based staff, doctors and therapists. Parents sought information and advice from one or more of these sources. In the survey parents were asked to indicate if their child had attended a SEDU prior to school entry. Parents would be more likely to be given professional and specialist advice from staff at the SEDU, which would perhaps influence them in the decision-making process. 58% of parents indicated that their child had attended an SEDU and when this is compared to the number of children who do not attend the same school as their

<sup>9</sup> Australian Social Trends 2003, Family and Community: State summary tables, <http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/>

**Parents will often seek advice on school choice, in particular at entry level to primary and secondary schooling.**

## Inclusive Education 'Education for All'

### A process of responding to the uniqueness of individuals, increasing:

- Presence,
- Access,
- Participation and
- Achievement

### in a learning society.

Education Queensland  
Disability Initiatives – Update  
June 17 2002, <http://education.qld.gov.au/curriculum/learning/students/disabilities/policy/initupdate1.doc>

siblings, the percentage is almost identical, at 57%. And of the 43% of children who do attend the same school as their siblings, 44% of those actually attend a special education unit within that school. In fact the majority of all respondents (53%) said that their child is enrolled in either a special school, a special education unit or an SEDU. So this suggests that the advice given by special educators in the early childhood area could direct parents to choose a segregated setting over a regular school setting. This has a significant impact on students with disabilities as the segregated pathway through education often leads into a lifelong segregated route.

While the Action Plan on Inclusive Education clearly states that Education Queensland is committed to the promotion of inclusive education with the goal of 'increasing the presence, access, participation and achievements of all students and especially students at educational risk'<sup>10</sup>, it is clear that for the families who participated in this study, the objective of inclusive education for students with disabilities within Queensland schools is still a long way from being met as 53% of the survey respondents' children with disability are still attending school in segregated settings.

Almost 80% of those parents surveyed stated that even though they felt they had chosen the school their child attends, there had been other factors influencing this decision; advice from teachers, guidance officers, therapists, doctors, other parents and friends. In a recent conversation with QPPD, Dr Roger Slee stated that special educators may not yet have the vision to see that their role in education remains an important one, even if special schools and SEUs were all closed. Clearly children with disabilities will need their educational needs met, however this does not have to be in a segregated setting. It's not merely a question of where these needs are met, but how.

In 2001 Education Queensland stated that 45 special schools remained, with 219 special education units located in mainstream schools<sup>11</sup>. EQ statistics show that the number of students enrolled in special education actually increased in 2001 and at 2,519 enrolments, was at its highest level for the five years since 1997.<sup>12</sup>

Parents were asked what were the **key areas of importance** for them before their child went to school and overwhelmingly parents identified that they wanted their child to develop good self-esteem, to feel valued and to be happy in a safe environment, in which they feel they belong, can develop friendships and can experience full social participation. Parents stated that the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills was important, and certainly more important than access to specialist teaching, therapy and specialist advice. The least important aspect for parents was learning "life skills".

In answer to the same question about **key areas of importance now**, the profile remained the same, except that specialist teaching had become marginally more important for some parents.

Survey respondents were asked to state if they were willing to participate in a focus group on this topic.

<sup>10</sup> *Action Plan for Inclusive Education - Students with Disabilities 2003-2005*. Education Queensland, 2002. P3

<sup>11</sup> *Brief history of the education of students with disabilities in Education Queensland*, Low Incidence Unit, 2002

<sup>12</sup> In 1997 2,499 enrolments, 1998 2,474 enrolments, 1999 2,458 enrolments, and 2000 2,401 enrolments, [www.education.qld.gov.au/schools/statistics/pdfs/es03\\_01.pdf](http://www.education.qld.gov.au/schools/statistics/pdfs/es03_01.pdf)



## How the focus group research was conducted

Five focus groups were held in four areas in Queensland; Rockhampton, Sunshine Coast, Gold Coast and Brisbane. These areas were chosen because of

- a) significant numbers of potential participants from the area and
- b) QPPD's own capacity to conduct the focus groups.

Dr Lesley Chenoweth, Senior Lecturer at the University of Queensland School of Social Work and Social Policy was engaged to conduct the focus groups. The focus group questions (Appendix C) were developed by the QPPD steering committee for this project and Dr Chenoweth. The focus groups were conducted between 24<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> June 2003.

### Focus Group Research: Who were the participants

A range of criteria was used to select participants for the focus groups; geographical, is child of school age, does the child attend a private or state school and the ascertainment type and level of the child's disability. A list of the participants is included at Appendix B. All participants were parents of school age children. 73% of the children attend state school and 27% attend a private school. The focus groups were designed to include parents of children with different types of disability, however one group, because of non-attendance of some participants, was made up of parents whose children were all ascertained under the Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) category.

The evidence from the survey about the parent's own level of education and the responses of the focus group participants supported the notion that parental expectations for themselves influenced the expectations parents had for their children. 58% of survey respondents had been schooled to Year 12 or tertiary level and 33% had completed year 10. Parents in the focus groups had expectations that their son or daughter would complete the compulsory years 1 to 10 of school. 47% said their child attended primary school, 53% attended high school with 30% in the later stages of schooling and aged between 15 and 18. Two parents expressed that their child wanted to finish Year 12 and proceed on to tertiary education.

The survey evidence showed that many parents were strongly influenced by the advice of the SEDU in their choice of school. The focus group research gave further evidence that parents do seek advice and guidance from many sources, including the SEDU and were eager to gain as much information about the process as they could.

Focus group participants also identified that they had in advance taken measures to pre-empt any possible source of dispute regarding their choice of school. People took major decisions prior to school entry, which would ensure that their choice of school would be supported.

In response to the question "If your child did not have a disability, would they be at this school?" 73% of the participants said that their child would not be at this school. 11% of focus group participants said their child attended a special school and 33% attended a special education unit attached to a regular school.

***They are now re-ascertaining him at a level 6, they've applied for emergency funding, they've been knocked back, they're still being told to continue applying because this a make or break time, because this a child who wants to go to university.***

-Parent

***He had gone through the SEDU route, he had done speech therapy, occupational therapy within the SEDU, then he also went to the \_ special ed unit for 18 months, the one that was at \_, so I was guided pretty well by his teacher, who was wonderful out at \_ and she said, "A lot of our kids do very well in schools with units" and I respected her opinion.***

-Parent

***I searched for a school that would support what I wanted and moved there***

- Parent

## **How do parents of children with disabilities measure the success or otherwise of the schooling process?**

In this research it was clear that parents want the schooling process to enable their children to develop their individual talents to the best of their abilities and to equip them with the skills to make the transition to adulthood as citizens participating to their own fullest ability in society.

Not surprisingly, when asked how they thought the system could be improved so that their child's participation and expected outcomes from schooling would increase, parents in the survey group and focus groups thought that the education system could benefit with more resources and more and better-skilled staff. The most commonly-voiced wish in the focus groups was for teaching and support staff to be properly trained, to have an understanding of teaching to diversity, to develop teaching methodologies which unlock the potential of students and recognise their individual qualities and skills, to think outside the square and be innovative while a significant number of parents indicated that more emphasis on improving social skills, developing membership of the school community, protecting children from harassment and bullying and the general safety of their child would genuinely improve their child's learning environment.

***it was clear that parents want the schooling process to enable their children to develop their individual talents to the best of their abilities and to equip them with the skills to make the transition to adulthood as citizens participating to their own fullest ability in society.***

## **What are the constraints that all parents have when choosing a school for their child?**

For parents, the choice of a school for their child/ren is one of the most important decisions they make on behalf of that child. This decision is subject to a number of constraints, some of which are not consciously acknowledged in the decision-making process, the majority of which are determined by the legal framework governing the provision of education by the state.

### **Economic**

While the state has an obligation to ensure that all children within a certain age range receive an education, some parents can choose to opt out of state education in favour of private education. This option is based on the ability to pay for that education. The economic circumstances of the family therefore determine if this is a real choice.

### **Geographic**

The geographic constraints which all parents face are formally referred to as the catchment area; if a student lives within the catchment area of a school, then s/he is guaranteed the right to enrol at the school. The geographical constraint of where a family lives in relation to the closest school will clearly influence school choice.

### **Residency**

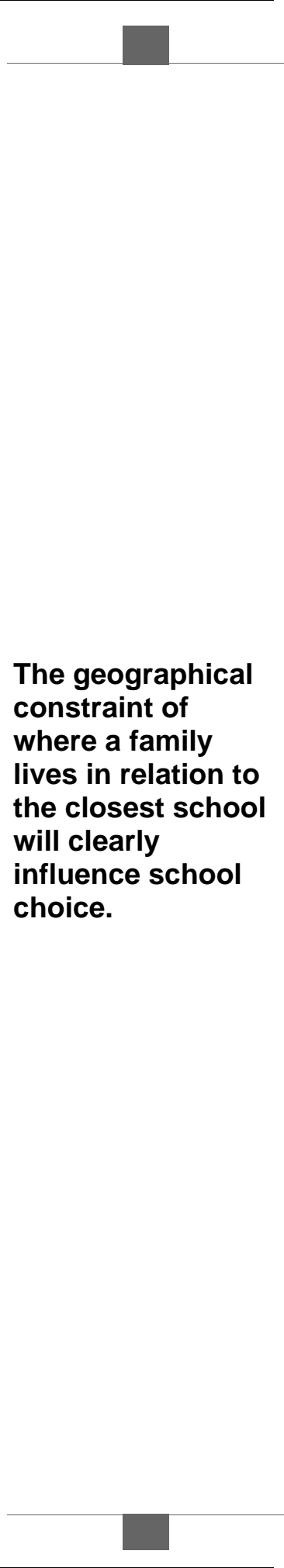
Linked to the geographic constraint is the requirement of residency. Parents must produce evidence of Australian citizenship, permanent residence status or eligibility under a visa category in order for their child to have the right to enrol at school. This research did not elicit any specific response from families who might be in this situation.

### **Bureaucratic**

There are bureaucratic constraints, which apply to school choice; the development of policy and guidelines by Education Queensland to manage and define catchment area for schools, school capacity, placement and enrolment for example, can effectively even remove choice from families.

### **Curriculum**

The decision to choose a school, in particular at secondary school level, is often constrained by the particular curriculum focus of that school. The range of Queensland Board of Secondary School Studies subjects on offer varies from school to school, reflecting a particular direction for that school and its students – academic focus, a broad range of vocational studies, or even extra-curricular options. This will clearly influence not only parents but also the students themselves, who at this stage in their school lives usually actively participate in the decision-making process.



**The geographical constraint of where a family lives in relation to the closest school will clearly influence school choice.**



**Parents have the responsibility to ensure that their child attends school and children have the right to receive an education.**

Curriculum therefore influences the choices of parents and students, perhaps less so at the initial stage of choosing a primary school.

### **Age**

The State of Queensland has a responsibility to provide education for children within the age range of 6 to 15 years of age. Education Queensland states that parents have the responsibility to ensure that their child attends school and children have the right to receive an education.<sup>13</sup>

### **Gender**

State education provides co-educational schooling, so for the majority of parents, whose children attend state schools, the gender of their child is not a particular determining factor in their choice of school. However those parents who choose private schools often do so because they particularly want the choice of single-sex education for their children, particularly at secondary school level. For some this is for religious or cultural reasons and others choose a single sex school because they believe their children may be safer, may be afforded greater opportunity, may experience a higher or different form of education and may be less exposed to distractions.

### **Child's own choice**

Parents when choosing a school may consider their child's own choice. At primary school level this decision may focus mainly on which of the child's friends are going to the same school. At the time parents are choosing a secondary school for their child, that decision is clearly one in which the child will participate on a much broader level. While the choice may still revolve around who of the child's friends will be going to that school, other factors such as the past student achievements, academic and sporting facilities at the school and how these fit in with the child's own interests, skills and abilities, transport issues and extra-curricular opportunity will also figure largely. At this stage the choice the child might make may conflict with parental choice and compromises and adjustments are part of the process. Not all decisions will be in the best interests of the child, however, the best-case scenario will always put those interests at the centre of the decision and not all decisions will, in the long run, provide the best outcomes.

<sup>13</sup> How does state education operate in Queensland, <http://education.qld.gov.au/schools/about/>



## What is the additional impact of generic constraints on choice for parents of children with disability?

### Economic

While economic factors are a general constraint for all parents, some parents of children with disability have their choice further constrained. Paradoxically, the ability to pay also imposes constraint on the choice. If the state school system for example, refuses to enrol a child on the basis that it cannot appropriately educate that child, in the case of one participant in the focus groups, the parent had no other option but to choose private education:

*But I had no choice. The state school system is not going to provide for my children so it's costing me \$40 - \$50,000 for my children's education.*

Other participants though were more likely to identify their inability to pay as a constraint, which is consistent with the economic constraints for all parents when selecting a school.

Parents in this study also indicated that they sometimes bear unusual costs to ensure their child attends school. The costs of getting to and from the school, in which they have enrolled their child on the basis of this school being able to best provide for the needs of their child can be significant.

In these cases, parental choice was so limited by the constraints placed on the situation by the system, that it can fairly be said that the families were given Hobson's choice, the option of taking the thing offered or nothing.

### Curriculum

For parents of students with disabilities it was not only the curriculum which is a factor in their choice of school but in addition, parents of children with disabilities from the survey group and the focus groups identified curriculum and assessment modification as a vital element in the successful acquisition of skills and knowledge for children with disabilities.

***I just want to say that (other parent) made that choice but a lot of people can't make that choice because they can't afford what it costs. When I was thinking of sending (child) to (private school) last year it was going to cost me something like \$200 a week.***

**- Parent**

***What didn't help me either living at \_\_, I was doing 1,000 kilometres a week taking the boys to school, then I'd come back home again, I'd only have four hours at home and then I'd have to be back in the car going back down to \_\_ to pick them up again. It was costing me \$500 a month in fuel to get my kids to school, so, we had no choice, we had to move.***

**- Parent**

## Curriculum and assessment modification

***The curriculum is not always modified and the assessment tasks are not always modified and I seem to always be going back and saying, "Why did she get an E?" She shouldn't be put in that situation, she should be given a program she is able to do.***

- Parent

***So after a huge battle, I got them to give a program that was more suitable to her needs. But shouldn't that be for the school to do? It's always because I've activated some sort of – so you know, I mean, this is a special ed unit, surely they'd get it right?***

- Parent

***Like trying to make them all do something they can't, it's like asking your child in a wheelchair to run round the oval. You're saying that this group of students who have these disabilities "Get out there and write this 500 word essay on what it means to be Australian".***

- Parent

Parents suggested that the lack of curriculum modification and the failure of the system to provide adaptable solutions to a wide range of learning inhibitors was effectively setting their children up to fail.

Parents observed that a consequence of this is that they are then caught up in a constant monitoring role, trying to ensure that curriculum and assessment modification occurs at many stages throughout the school experience. Parents were mystified as to why their instigation and insistence on modified programs for their children was necessary.

If parents can readily identify that some curriculum modification is needed, it is difficult to understand why this often does not occur and students with disabilities are given tasks not oriented towards their skill and ability level.

When even quite minor adjustments are made to adapt the curriculum for the student, the flow-on effects and benefits for the student the class and the teacher are self-evident.

*You know the curriculum that they have to follow? I've told the teacher that he couldn't possibly do all this; it's too confusing. Why don't you just blow this bit up. In the beginning it was one word and so I've had the teachers blow it up to this size and he's just got that much to do and in that time while they're doing a whole page, he can finish his bit and he's achieved the same as what they have. It's just a different level. It's so important that they're able to finish the work instead of - he's only got one word done out of this whole lot, he never finishes it, so he's got to bring it home for homework.*

In this example, a parent has identified how important a sense of achievement is; when students with disabilities are not given a modified curriculum, which enables them not only to achieve but to strive beyond their skills and abilities, they are more likely to underachieve generally throughout life. By setting up a pattern of failure at this stage in their lives, a lifetime cycle of failure and under-achievement may be established. Some so-called 'challenging behaviour' may be linked to this factor; many students with disabilities may be bored, frustrated and confused by their school experience and when they are set few or no achievement targets to attain, may spend their time at school doing very little, with very little expected of them. Perhaps this type of early negative experience becomes part of a lifetime cycle in which the person experiences negative reactions which in turn triggers negative behaviour patterns, thus reinforcing a continuum of low expectation.

The Special Education Curriculum Consortium (SECC) has been working on the development of curriculum frameworks to address the issue of student diversity and within this has identified the need for development and modification of the Foundation Levels in each of the Key Learning Areas to ensure their compatibility with other Education Queensland curriculum initiatives. One of the key areas for further review is ensuring that teachers receive pre-service and in-service training in these new curriculum frameworks.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Item 1/7, Brief 7, *Inclusive Curriculum*, Ministerial Taskforce for Students with Disabilities, March 2003

## Geographic and Bureaucratic

For parents of children with disabilities the geographic and bureaucratic constraints on their choice of school may be constrained further on the grounds that the local school is not suitable for their child.

*So I actually talked to them about alternatives and then I discovered that I could have the closest school with a unit which was \_\_\_ SEU, which was out of the catchment area for my child normally, but because he had a disability he could go there, which would mean that my second son could not go there, because it's out of his catchment area.*

While in the survey 66% of respondents said that their child attended the local school, the evidence from the focus group suggests that there are other factors which influence this. Many families were pro-active before their child went to school; they searched around until they found a school which they liked and which they thought would suit their child and they made life-changing decisions in order to ensure that their children could attend that school.

*We moved from \_\_\_ to come down this way and all that he needed was at that school so I'm very happy.*

*We had to move, we had to sell our house.*

While others, unable to change their circumstances, have no real choice.

*I can't drive, but if I did I would change schools. There's one primary school in \_\_\_ and that's where he is.*

And even when people felt that they were fortunate enough to have a choice, it is evident that it is often the special education unit (SEU) within the school which defines that choice. In this example, it is questionable whether this choice would have been available if only one of the two schools had had an SEU.

*I actually had a choice of which primary school because two were the exact same distance and they both had units attached so I actually got to choose as to which school I would send him.*

***We actually moved down here from \_\_\_ to give her better choices because up there, there was no choice.***

***I go up to the school with a visual impairment unit and I'm absolutely amazed, when asking for home reading books for (child), they didn't have any. I just volunteered, I went in and they said I guess we should do something about this. This unit's been running for probably 15 to 20 years. I went in there and I just started typing out books and then they started typing out books. Now they've got this whole lot of books. I'm just sitting there thinking I don't believe this, that they didn't have any home reading material in the visual impairment unit. It wasn't until I went in there to do it then they started doing it.***

- Parent

## Specialist Training

Parents from the survey group and the focus groups identified the lack of specialist training for teachers as a major reason for the failure of the education system in Queensland to provide good educational outcomes for their children with disabilities.

*I was just going to say that the new syllabus documents are aimed to be used at different outcome levels. But the trouble is this, and I don't know how this reflects on choice but a lot of teachers haven't actually been in-serviced to learn how to use it. So they are not actually aware that you can look at the outcomes at level 3 and realise that there are companion or partner outcomes at level 1, so you can still be working on the same topic, whether it's science or whatever, and you can be aiming most of the class at level 3 but you may have some kids that would be working on level 4 and you may have some kids that would be working at level 1 or even pre level 1, foundation level. So really syllabus documents are aimed to be inclusive.*

Parents know that curriculum and assessment modification is an available option, indeed often they provide the solution themselves, which involves nothing further than creative thinking and some additional materials.

## Other factors

As well as the choice of single sex education, there are sometimes significant religious or cultural reasons why parents choose a private school for their child. The largest provider of education outside of the state in Queensland is the Catholic Education system.

*We lived in the local area, we decided that, we have three children, we're Catholic, we wanted our children to go to the local catholic school*

While these parents identified that the Catholic school their child attended as providing the 'best' for their child with disability, their choice was always going to be within the Catholic system.

Queensland Catholic Education has policies guiding its practice and one of its policies is "Inclusive Practices in Queensland Catholic Schools". This document states that Catholic education authorities and schools will:

*Be accountable in terms of Church, educational and legal imperatives that support inclusive practices;  
Create conditions to support successful outcomes for all students.<sup>15</sup>*

However, some parents felt that their children had been failed by the Catholic system and were deeply affected by this rejection, which challenged their own participation in their spiritual community.



*We've had a pretty crazy trip. I thought our journey would have been rather smooth. We had a very close catholic parish community and when I had the interview with the principal and the special needs teacher for preschool, they wanted to withdraw (child) and I said "No, give the (child) a chance" and the principal was slamming his fist on the desk and telling me it doesn't work and the special needs teacher crying in front of me because I didn't understand her. I realised I had to get (child) away from that environment so I moved both (children) to (a private school). [ ] We actually lost our community we became fragmented.*

However, for some parents of children with disability the choice of private education is further constrained by bureaucratic considerations. Most private educational establishments can select who attends their school; they do not rely on the same kinds of policy and guidelines which determine state school enrolment.

Indeed, because of the state's responsibility to provide education, state schools sometimes appeared to be more flexible and accepting than the private schools, and parents were more likely to see this as a welcome.

***We've had a pretty crazy trip. I thought our journey would have been rather smooth. We had a very close catholic parish community and when I had the interview with the principal and the special needs teacher for preschool, they wanted to withdraw (child) and I said "No, give the (child) a chance" and the principal was slamming his fist on the desk and telling me it doesn't work and the special needs teacher crying in front of me because I didn't understand her. I realised I had to get (child) away from that environment so I moved both (children) to (a private school). [ ] We actually lost our community we became fragmented.***

**- Parent**

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.qcec.qld.catholic.edu.au/pdf/InclusivePractices.pdf>

***We have this whole attitude all the time, like the deputy actually said to me when I asked what resources did they need that they didn't have and I was going to apply for them – You have to understand this is a regular school for regular children. She should not have that attitude.***

- Parent

***The support at that school is just amazing, you are welcomed any time, you are made welcome; it's not, "Oh well come and see me if you've got a problem". They'll stop you in the playground – "Hey is everything going all right?" Just the attitude is so much different.***

- Parent

## **What are the constraints on choice specific to parents of children with disability**

Parents of children with disability have the same generic constraints on their choice as all parents, - if they can't afford to send their child to private school, it's not an option, if the child does not meet the age or residency requirements, s/he cannot enrol at school.

We have identified that there are additional factors around these generic constraints of choice, which particularly influence the decision-making process for parents of children with disabilities. However there are specific additional constraints on parental choice for parents of students with disabilities which this research identified as paradoxically resulting in different, segregated pathways for students with disabilities. The focus groups identified a number of themes, which reflected these additional and specific constraints.

### **Attitude**

One common theme for most of the survey group, which was clearly elucidated by the focus group discussions, was attitude. Not only for their choice of school, but also for their sense of belonging in their community generally. Often, parents spoke about an attitude which rejected their child.

Parents in both the survey and the focus groups identified the attitude they encountered at the school as one of the most important factors guiding their choice. The attitude of the school community towards their child with disabilities and the attitude parents wanted or expected were central to how satisfied parents are with their choice of school, and many parents identified attitude as a key issue for social inclusion in general.

A negative attitude does nothing to welcome the student and his/her family into the school community, which may also trigger negative responses on behalf of the whole school community and can lead to further rejection of the student.

In contrast, the student and the family can be buoyed and strengthened by positive support and a commitment on behalf of the school community to making it work for the school, the student and the family:

*I went and talked to them and just the attitude that I received was so much different from what I'd had at the other school. It was like, "Hey he can come here, it'd be lovely to have him". When someone wants to give them a chance, wants to accept them and give them a go; that was the biggest thing.*

QPPD believes that within EQ there is a genuine and sincere concern that schools must be committed to behaving in a welcoming and supportive way as an expression of a positive and inclusive attitude. However, this commitment must be explicitly expressed in EQ policy and guidelines if the opportunity for EQ to provide leadership and direction for a change in attitude is not to be lost.

## Stability

Parents of children with disabilities often make the choice of schooling many times and may find the options are reduced. This lack of stability and constant need to monitor and be monitored is one of the most gruelling factors identified by parents in both the survey and the focus groups. Families are forced to be ever vigilant, unable to settle into a routine or continue with other aspects of their lives.

Changes in staff and routine threaten the stability of any school, but for families, whose child/ren attend/s special education units, these changes can often be the catalyst for yet another situation in which choices have to be made.

Many parents identified that lack of stability was in fact one of the consequences of choosing inclusion. As parents are offered incentives, such as transport subsidies, more resources and aide time to accept the recommended placement, which is often in the segregated setting of an SEU or Special School, it becomes easier for parents to choose a segregated setting because this choice will be supported more by the system.

It is a much tougher decision to make the choice of inclusion, which can involve a constant battle to ensure that the placement will work, with fewer resources, no transport subsidy and less or no classroom support.

*we lived at \_ and I wanted him to go to (school in different area) and that was like No way, the Education Dept more or less said to me that the most appropriate school for him as far as they were concerned was \_ and that was it.... because I was also trying to get him transport in a mini bus down there and because they said Well you live in \_, you have to send your child to this school or that school and that's it. I wrote to my Member of Parliament and someone in the government. They all said No they can't do anything. They just passed the buck one person to another and nobody wanted to know about what we wanted and what we felt was best for \_, and what was going to be the best for him in the long run.*

***We were on a trial and we were reviewed every 3 months I think it was. We do feel they are very supportive and they are working hard and he's managed 6 months so far with only one suspension and quite a few meetings, so we are thinking if he's going to make it anywhere we think it's going to be here. We live in dread and we don't know where else to go. This is our last ditch effort***

- Parent

***Since she's been here in the unit she sort of mainstreams for some subjects, but she's in the unit for others. They've had 3 changes of head of unit in 15 months. She's had 5 case managers and so many numerous changes of teacher that it's really difficult to get any kind of continuity between people. You get someone who's good and then they move on. I think we might be getting somewhere at the moment but I'm not hopeful it's going to work out even now***

- Parent

## Safety

The safety of their child with disabilities is a crucial factor for parents in the choice of school. In addition, parents are of course concerned for the general welfare of all students at the school; no parent wants to think that they are sending their child to a school where violence, intimidation, harassment and bullying occur and are not dealt with appropriately, however, sometimes parents of children with disabilities identified that the safety of their child depended on factors other than the school setting.

***Certainly a safe environment where your child is going to learn up to his ability and to realise their potential and I don't want to have to settle for less, whatever their potential is. And that's hard on the Education Dept they don't have lots of money, but I think we could be doing better.***

- Parent

***But I suppose my first priority having had such an abysmal experience of the state environment; you must be safe before you get anything else. By that I mean protected, not just safe from being abused, which he was, but also safe emotionally.***

- Parent

*The reason that I got the parent preferred placement that I wanted was on the grounds of (child's) social and emotional well-being. It actually turned out his social and emotional well being was jeopardised by them not teaching him, but in general his social, emotional well-being was better at a school where he'd come right up from pre school, everyone knew him. And the interesting thing is that people think that units are safer places than regular schools! Because everyone knew \_\_\_ and every upcoming grade was educated about \_\_\_ and (his needs), everyone knew \_\_\_, he then was safe from bullying. We went to the so-called unit, which has kids included in the classrooms but he was bullied, he had six or seven episodes of bullying*

In this instance, the parent has identified that keeping her child within the community which has known her child for a long time and is aware of his needs proved to be the safest place; the education system recommended placement in a segregated setting, presumably on the grounds of resourcing for the child's disability, clearly did not work.

Parents are aware of the limitations of the system - there will always be someone any system fails – but they at least wanted some effort to be made to improve the system.

Parents are naturally protective of their children and it is difficult for parents to acknowledge that the options available to them may have been more harmful than beneficial.

Parents also found that in their choice of secondary school, the theme of safety was much more important. As young adolescents and teenagers develop and experiment with their own increasing sense of having authority over their own lives, the boundaries of what is and is not acceptable are frequently tested. Unfortunately it is often the most vulnerable in any group who provide the testing ground.

*I wanted to know he was going to be safe and taken care of for those hours he was at school.*

*That's a big thing I'm feeling now preparing for high school is the safety issue.*

*Of course primary school is much more family-oriented but at high school you're just out there.*

## Clustering

Clustering means that certain schools accept students with particular disabilities, but not others and therefore, over a period, most or all the students with disabilities enrolled at that school have similar disabilities. This is called 'coding' by Education Queensland and operates under the premise that by resourcing one school rather than many, that school be best-equipped to respond to the particular disability, either because it has the staff, the resources or accessible built environment. Many parents in this study identified this as a form of segregation within segregation, further isolating segregated groups from the regular classroom.

In the case of students with hearing or vision impairment, many are often exclusively taught in special schools.

*I think HI is different to everybody else because you have to go to school where there is a teacher of the deaf. If you choose not to do that as a parent you would have to understand very clearly that there is nobody in that school who knows how to teach your child. However in some areas in Queensland there are no teachers of the deaf anyway, and you would just have to take whatever you could get.*

This parent had no choice but to send her child to a regular school, due to the available regional facilities.

*We actually lived in (city in another state) when she was small and we had a choice down there of several schools, not our local school, but several schools. We could either go to an oral school or a signing school. But when we came to \_ they said "We don't have that choice here, we have total communication so you'll do both", so we said "Fine that's good", because our daughter now mixes in both circles, she can sign and she can speak so that's not an issue.*

For a small number of parents who participated in this research, the profound nature of their child's disability left them questioning what current mainstream methods and places of education could offer their child. They expected and wanted a safe, caring and nurturing environment, where their child's functional needs are being met. It may be that these functional needs leave very little space for the educational needs of these students to be met. However, this does not mean that those children do not have those educational needs, nor does it mean that there is no obligation on the part of Education Queensland to find ways to meet those needs.

*These are very high support needs kids, with multiple disabilities, and our (child) is tube fed through a button in the stomach, and other kids have to have medication, and when you take out of the day the amount of time required to do those things, medication, tube feeding, changing nappies, there's very little time for anything else, so really they are caring for the kids more than anything else and they could provide more if they had more funding. When (child) went for a period of three semesters to the therapy centre at \_, (child) made a lot of progress there. They had every day regular physiotherapy sessions and just constant stuff. This is the sort of level that these kids need of support in the special schools and it's just not there. So even though we think the special school's the best place for (child) and it's a very caring environment, that's about the best you can say of it. It's very caring and they do look after the kids and they've got their interests at heart, but they can't provide the amount of therapy they need because of the funding. It's not a high priority.*

*If you get categorised as something else then you would be referred to another unit somewhere else. It's a type of clustering. If you had a visual impairment you would automatically be sent to \_ in that area. So it's not choice within that. It's a clustering of like disabilities, which is another form of segregation.*

- Parent

*She's currently at \_Special which she has been, together with the SEDU, since she was about 3 years old. It was indicated early that because of her profound disabilities that would be the place suitable for her.*

- Parent

**The parent, child, teacher, triangular collaboration and the whole three support the success, there's not one part that can be blamed for the non-success or the failure or anything.**

**- Parent**

**(Child) was to go on camp. He was all ready to go. The night before he had an asthma attack. I did the right thing, I went and told them he had an asthma attack during the night, here's all his medication. The deputy said I don't want him to go on the camp.**

**- Parent**

**She was totally excluded from a school project, brought into the room where parents and everyone was watching, fell at my feet in tears when she realised she was left out.**

**- Parent**

## Suspension and exclusion

It could be argued that suspension and exclusion is a general factor that all parents may face; suspension or exclusion from school is a school strategy for dealing with situations, in which schools find it difficult to maintain control. It is clearly important to establish schools as "safe, accepting and disciplined environments"<sup>16</sup>. However the strategy of suspension and exclusion simply removes one element of the situation – the student – without addressing the issue fully and exploring other possible remedies. Many elements are involved in the relationship between the school, the community and the family, yet all too often it is the student and the family who shoulder the full burden of responsibility, when this relationship breaks down.

Schools and the community contribute to the alienation of students and their families when the systemic issues raised by the suspension or exclusion process are not part of the solution. Yet, for parents of children with disabilities, this factor can affect their choices at the very start of their child's education with little or no exposure to the system.

*(Child) was 3 and a half, nearly 4 so I went to the SEDU and I think he had one or two sessions there. We were there very briefly and then they said, "would you mind if we tested him?" And I didn't mind because I didn't realise the implications of that. They didn't say anything. So then he was excluded and I complained because I was desperate, I had no support .... and I just expected that we could access something, so I complained. We had an interview with the regional manager, where he said, "This is the policy".*

For another parent the school raised the expectation that they would allow the child back to school if a certain course of action was taken, which the parent discovered was a false expectation.

*When he was expelled halfway through grade 6 I was told the only way they would take him back is if I (took child out of school and he underwent psychiatric assessment) for a while. So we went through (assessment) at 13 years of age to keep the teachers happy, to show them we were trying to do the right thing.*

*After we did the right thing, we sent \_ (for assessment) I rang the school and said can he come back for the rest of grade 7, so that he could graduate with the other kids. Oh no, I really don't think so, we don't really want him here.*

There are more subtle levels of exclusion practised at schools, which are increasing in frequency and can prove to be quite damaging in their psychological impact.

A number of parents identified that their child was sometimes not included in school activities without any prior consultation with the parents, nor was any effort made to substantially alter the activity to enable that child to participate in the activity.

<sup>16</sup> *Years 1-10 Curriculum Framework for Education Queensland Schools Policy and Guidelines: A framework for the future*, The State of Queensland (Department of Education) 2001, P.3.

Children with disabilities are often not allowed to stay in school for the whole day – another subtle form of exclusion. **No other group of students is ‘offered this option’, and it is in fact a significant reduction in learning opportunity – if a child is not attending school, it is not possible for the school to provide for that child’s educational needs.** The impact of part-time placement on the student can also be very distressing and can have significant consequences, which impact on the family economic and social circumstances.

*He got upset because he used to come home in a cab and they pulled him out at 2.30 to come home in the cab. He didn’t want to leave school.*

*The fact that he comes home at 1.30, if this was (other child) I would say that’s not acceptable. The school is saying he is not missing anything, well why doesn’t everybody go home at 1.30? For me it was so devaluing of my son because it’s like saying “What are you complaining about? You’ve got him there until 1.30, and let’s be honest he’s got (a disability)”, like that makes it OK. That sort of attitude I think I’ve found the hardest thing.*

Some parents are unable to continue in full-time employment and single-parent families are particularly hard-hit by part-time placement.

Many of the focus group participants talked about how the success of their child’s school experience depended upon the collaborative efforts and shared commitment of the school, the community and the family.

*(child) has got a thing for making things with wood, so they got a man to come in while the others are doing art classes, this man comes and does woodwork with \_\_. He’s a volunteer, they’ve got a volunteer to come in..*

*The school community is missing out on knowing our children as well. Knowing our children brings out a special part of the community. We signed our child up for soccer a couple of years ago and we felt it was a good time to do it. He was 6 and none of them know what to do at that age. So he went along and I thought well we’ll sign him up and we’ll see what’s going to happen. He might start it and then quit it but who knows. He saw the whole season through, the coach and us, we realised that the game times aren’t so good for him. The time that is good for him is the training time and the coach accommodated him, the coach felt successful because \_\_ was listening to him. They realised there’s a disability there and I didn’t deny it and I didn’t offer it either but they saw he was different but they all came to the party and they accommodated him and they learned – they learn from our children.*

*With \_\_ especially, who’s now 18, but with primary school our hassles started about Grade 4 and \_\_ with the Aspergers is very violent and very abusive. I was getting phone calls nearly every day. Come and pick him up we don’t want him here anymore. So he would probably get an hour maybe two hours schooling each day. Luckily I was in with a support group of the other mums from \_\_ with children with disabilities so having them behind me, we contacted the Education Department. We had a meeting with them, that went on for one and a half years probably, but one of the other girls was having the same problem because her son was Aspergers and they were both in the same school.... They ended up telling us that the boys could only go to school until eleven o’clock, so we couldn’t leave \_\_ to go and do anything because you had to be back at the school, so it stopped our lives completely. You had to be back there at 11 o’clock to pick them up. We got through that a little bit with meetings with the Education Dept and said we’re not going to put up with this, our children deserve to be at school like everyone else does.*

- Parent

***I've been told that they can then say to you, if she's a 6 then there is entry to the special school system, and if we say no, they can say that's fine but we will not give you placement in the school, we will not support you in that school, so they may take away the funding.***

- Parent

***There's always hanging over your head, if you make this choice you lose this, you lose the transport, you don't get any help whatsoever.***

- Parent

## Ascertainment

Ascertainment, the process which Education Queensland uses to categorise types and level of disability, is identified as restricting choice for parents of children with disabilities. Children with an ascertainment level of 5 or 6 (scale is 1 to 6, with 6 being the highest) are more frequently placed in special education units or special schools. In QPPD's survey, **70% of children ascertained were ascertained at level 5 or 6.**

The choice of an ordinary local school is much more difficult for parents to secure in the first place and to keep in the long term, when the child has a high ascertainment level.

*When I told (a friend) the school I was sending (child) to, she said you may as well put her in a special school if you are going to do that because that school will exclude her. But I did send her there and she is withdrawn for an hour and a half a day now and we are looking at a level 6 because they want some more aide time, just more time. I'm nervous because I have been warned that even though they have promised that isn't the entry into a special school, which we will not send \_ to, because \_ is doing really fine at the moment, but she could need more time, so we are grappling which way do we go with that*

When parents do invoke their right to a parent-preferred placement, many disincentives, so that the choice is less attractive may be offered. The most frequent disincentives are the refusal to give a transport subsidy to the parent-preferred placement or the withdrawal of support from a teacher aide and resources.

Parents feel that they are being punished for making certain choices, in particular ones which EQ have not recommended. They are discouraged from taking certain decisions, even though they know it may be the right decision for their child, because the consequences of doing it 'tough' - without transport, without resources, without aide time, without willingness and support - is daunting and not surprisingly many parents do take the option, which will be less of a struggle and 'easier' for the family.

Parents felt they were often bullied or harassed by the officials and bureaucrats involved in the ascertainment process or placement meeting. This was also revealed in QPPD's 2001 report on placement.<sup>17</sup>

One important dilemma families face is the portrayal of their child's abilities. Everyone likes to focus on what they can do rather than what they can't, yet families are forced to emphasise negative aspects of their child in the ascertainment process, because by lowering children into the bottomless pit of ascertainment level 6, parents are assured that resources will be provided.

<sup>17</sup> Education Queensland's Placement Policy and Process: A Report. Queensland Parents for People with a Disability Inc 2001, P21



*The ascertainment is I think just so demeaning, it's just disgusting to think that you can go to a room and sit down, OK the teachers from the school that's fine, but then you've got this other fellow that you don't know and you've got somebody on the phone making decisions about your child. You've been trying to get your child as prepared for school as possible, you've got your child reading, you've got your child toilet trained or whatever but you've got to say all the bad things about your child so you can get the funding. You want that level 6 because they'll get the aide time, whereas he can do this and that, but all they want to know about is what he can't do.*

Ascertainment will be replaced by profiling, which is currently on a pilot trial with EQ. Profiling claims to link a student's educational needs with funding needs. However, at this stage and in both the survey and the focus groups the ascertainment process was identified as the common currency for assessment. As identified in QPPD previous report on the placement policy, ascertainment and placement of students with disabilities in special schools and SEUs does not support a model of inclusion, but contributes to the discrimination against and further segregation of students with disabilities. Is choice now being used to further justify this discrimination?

### **Physical Access**

For parents of children with physical disability, physical access to the built environment will affect which school the child will attend.

While this constraint on choice might become less of an issue as the building regulations and codes are amended and developed to ensure accessibility of new buildings or renovations, the anti-discrimination legislation at both the State and Commonwealth levels provides a loophole to schools situated in older, inaccessible buildings in that the cost of making the buildings accessible can be identified as an 'unjustifiable hardship' thus exempting the school from complying with the legislation.

***With my child who's in an electric wheelchair and can drive around himself, the last couple of years we've had a lot of trouble with including him in the classroom. Like you've got a computer but the power point's there and the blackboard is over there so we have to be here, but we can't see the blackboard. So I supplied curtains so there's not as much glare on the blackboard so he can see it half the day. The electric wheelchair could only just fit past the blackboard to go up to the group area. He's been in a relocatable building that only had stair access.***

**- Parent**

## Funding and resourcing issues

For parents of children with disabilities the funding and resourcing of their child at school, is a major factor in their choice of school. The promise of aide time, equipment, therapy is a powerful incentive. However much parents voiced their frustration at what is on offer as being too little or simply papering over the cracks, they also acknowledged that while the available resources are important, the individual response of the school to the way in which these resources were used and the willingness to make the school choice work within this financial constraint were what might ultimately prove to be one of the most important factors.

*As it turns out we are in a (private high school), which (child) gets the train to by himself, but that choice was made purely because when we went there they were the most open, willing, accepting, welcoming school. Not because they looked as though they had special supports for guys with disability, although they do, they do have very much an individual emphasis and programs and they do have a huge diversity of kids at that school...So it was a choice about welcoming and acceptance, it wasn't about academic standing or special curriculum. All of those things we did check out and they are very much individually based, they do have special needs support but it's not a separate unit, they have a special needs coordinator who helps all the subject teachers and there's a teacher aide in all classes. Not for (child), but for the class.*

**So it was a choice about welcoming and acceptance, it wasn't about academic standing or special curriculum.**

**- Parent**

Significantly, the Draft Productivity Commission Inquiry Report into the DDA, released in November 2003, while acknowledging that the funding arrangements for education were outside the terms of reference for the inquiry, stated that:

Funding arrangements, among many other factors, affect education choices for all students. However, to the extent that funding arrangements restrict choice more for students with disabilities than for students without disabilities, they reduce equality of opportunity for these students.<sup>18</sup>

The Senate Inquiry into Education of Students with Disabilities noted in its report that:

*Some inquiry participants expressed concern that current funding arrangements restrict education choice for school students with disabilities to a greater extent than students without disabilities. This could contribute to discrimination by increasing the likelihood that some schools would be able to claim unjustifiable hardship under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992.<sup>19</sup>*

<sup>18</sup>Review of the Disability Discrimination Act 1992, Draft Report, Productivity Commission 2003, Melbourne, p377

<sup>19</sup>Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities, Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee, Department of the Senate, Canberra. 2002

## The Impact of constraints of choice

This research revealed that the consequences of the combination of the generic, additional and specific constraints for students with disability, their parents and families are sometimes devastating. The focus group participants expressed a level of long-term, debilitating stress and strain on the family unit, the individuals within the family and in particular on their child with disability.

Parents of students with disabilities are far more likely to remain actively involved in the process of education through primary school and often well into secondary school. This is sometimes a consequence of the perceived need to constantly monitor the education process and sometimes as a result of the continuum of choice parents find themselves in.

*I had just wanted him to go on to that school but there was no unit at the school and I really looked into the school, what facilities they had, what the teachers felt, what the principal felt. The principal said to me, "Well you know can get a bus if you go to a different school. He might cope in grade 1 but I don't think he'd cope in grade 3 and we don't have the facilities to give him the extra help so you'd be better off going to a different school". My closest school with a unit I had a really good look at. For about 3 months I went there every week diligently, whether I was invited or not, and actually was told you should get an appointment, you need an appointment to come and show up at the unit to find out what's going on. I said, "but that defeats my purpose because I want to know what's happening when I'm not here", so I did that for three or four months. I saw a lot of things that I wasn't happy with.*

For many families, the experience of schooling brings with it much emotional distress, periods of depression and hopelessness and high levels of stress and strain.

Many parents in the focus groups expressed these experiences time and again and for many the consequences were family and personal breakdown and heartbreakingly for many, the breakdown of their child.

One parent whose child goes to a private school stated, not surprisingly, that this factor and the way in which the school supported her child through this period of crisis was a guiding factor in her school choice.

*Ultimately the school was my choice but it wasn't my first choice. I would have preferred (child) in a state school... They found out in grade 9 when (child) jumped off the building that (child) really was suicidal and saw the need for counselling and since then (child) has been a lot better and the guidance officer has been good.*

And another parent stated that the choice of school had become a source of tension for the parent and the child.

*(Child) attends the local high school and we're having a very rocky year. (Child) is in Grade 9. (Child) has gone from being a kid who loves school to someone who wants to stay home all the time. The doctor recently diagnosed (child) as having depression so (child) is now on anti-depressants.*

***I've been up to the school 8 times this year trying to make things better***

- Parent

***But it broke me especially, because I was so strong and my husband and we were lost and we had to go in a totally different direction. And we've never ever come back.***

- Parent

***I've gone through having a teenager who was suicidal for 18 months asking me every single day when he came home from school to assist him to end his life. When he was in primary school I paid him to have his bum on the seat in class and if he actually made it all the way through the day, then he got a little surprise at the end of the day. If he actually got five days in a row, then he got a bonus cash incentive. That child was very ill from 5 o'clock Sunday through until 7 o'clock Friday night for 4 years.***

- Parent

**“It is well-recognised that some physical or mental disability can generate a powerful barrier to the ability to interact with society and that the state has some obligation to reduce or remove these barriers”**

**Social Exclusion, Children and Education: Conceptual and Measurement Issues, Klasen, Stephan, OECD Expert Seminar, OECD, 1998.**

## Findings and Discussion

While the evidence from this research clearly applies only to the particular groups of people, who participated in the survey and the focus groups, the findings are nonetheless significant and important in their implications for the debate around choice. This research demonstrates that choice for the majority of the participants was a very complex issue, constrained by factors, which most other families do not experience. It also highlights that the policy and guidelines currently in development by Education Queensland are not consistent with the practice, which families encounter; the rhetoric does not match the reality.

The evidence from this research indicates that:

- Parents of students with disabilities want the same things from education as all parents.
- Parents of students with disabilities are offered a range of options for the education of their child, but there is no real choice; the actual experience of the parents in this study indicates that the notion of choice is an illusion.
- It is difficult to take the option which is not recommended by EQ, parents feel that they are punished for insisting on inclusion, whereas the recommended option, laden with the incentives of resources, therapy, transport and other supports is sometimes very hard to resist.

The findings in this report details the sometime unproductive, often frustrating and sadly demoralising struggle which many students with disabilities and their families experience through the education system, the limited or few prospects and the lifelong implications of this for those students.

1. The majority of students with disability attend school at an SEU or special school and do not attend the same school as their siblings.

QPPD asks how EQ can justify the promotion of education in segregated settings, when its own policies state that inclusion is central to effective schooling.

2. Parents said that their child would not be at the school they currently attend if they did not have a disability and the advice and information given to them by teachers, school officials and other professionals is often biased towards segregated education pathways and strongly influences the decision-making process.

QPPD believes that parents are often persuaded to send their children to special school and SEUs by the advice and information available to them from professional sources. ‘Expert advice’ always exerts a strong influence on the decision-making process for most people. When this advice originates from those with a vested interest in ‘special education’ – for example, SEDU teachers, guidance officers, therapists, - it appears to lead parents along the segregated education pathway more often than not.

How can Education Queensland justify the promotion of education in segregated settings, when its own policies state that inclusion is central to effective schooling? How does EQ ensure that special educators implement its policies by positively promoting and practically supporting inclusive education? How can special education expertise be best used in an inclusive education system?

3. Parents want their child to be challenged to learn, be safe, happy and valued.

QPPD reiterates that these are key elements of education that all parents seek for their children. Parents of children with disabilities do not seek different outcomes for their children, so why offer them different choices? What is EQ saying about the human value and potential of students with disabilities if they are not providing them with the same choices as all students?

4. A consequence of choice for some parents of children with disability is greater economic constraints.

QPPD questions why resources are not allocated to support students with disabilities in regular schools to enable their full participation in education.

5. In the choice of a school, families sometimes make many life-changing decisions.

QPPD believes that school communities must develop flexible and inclusive responses to enable all students within the community to realise their potential.

6. Ascertainment and the placement policy limit options for the choice of school.

How is the commitment to inclusive education expressed in EQ policy and guidelines? What progress has EQ made on the development of a common enrolment policy?

7. The attitude of the school community toward their child is the strongest influence on school choice.

How does EQ demonstrate and foster leadership to assist school communities to behave in a welcoming and supportive way as an expression of a positive and inclusive attitude?

8. A consequence of choice was often a lack of stability for the family.

QPPD questions why families of students with disabilities are forced to live in a state of flux brought about by the inequity of 'choice'

9. Part-time placement or other forms of exclusions and suspension exert great influence over parental choice.

The lack of assessment and curricular modification points to the need to develop and modify curriculum frameworks which reflect the diversity of educational needs and that teachers receive pre and in-service training in this area.

**What is EQ saying about the human value and potential of students with disabilities if they are not providing them with the same choices as all students?**

**“There’s small choice  
in rotten apples”**

*The Taming of the Shrew,  
Shakespeare, William, Act 1  
Scene 1.*

10. Families suffer emotional distress, strain and stress as a consequence of the notion of choice.

QPPD acknowledges the cost borne by families and suggests that the notion of choice affects this cost significantly.

While this research indicates that many parents said they had made this choice of school, even when this choice was for the segregated setting of a special school or an SEU, it is evident that many parents had no other options to choose from, had unsuccessfully worked through all the other options or had been encouraged to make particular choices. QPPD can conclude that while parents were, in all instances, bending over backwards in their efforts to find the right place for their child, for many parents of children with disability the right to choose the school their child attends is illusory.

This research exposes the non-sense of the notion of choice for parents of students with disability. This current study confirms that students with disability and their families are actually given little choice and that what is on offer fails to provide students with disability opportunities to develop, learn and grow and that choice can be seen to be imposing additional restrictions, reducing, sometimes removing options and resulting in fewer opportunities for personal growth and development.

One of the key recommendations from the 2001 QPPD report around placement is that enrolment in school should follow the same process used to enrol all students.<sup>20</sup> While a common enrolment policy may address some of our concerns about the discriminatory nature of placement, it may also reveal that Education Queensland may need to review and reform current mainstream educational models in order to develop truly inclusive practice.

“There’s small choice in rotten apples”<sup>21</sup>

At the core of QPPD’s findings lies the fact that while the apples might be rotten, the tree from which they have fallen is not; it is only neglect, which has turned the fruit rotten. Yet within that rotten fruit are seeds, which if tended and nurtured can germinate and grow into an orchard.

It is not so long ago that education was the exclusive prerogative of the middle and upper classes in society. Free, compulsory, secular education was introduced in Queensland in 1875 and specific legislation was introduced in 1934 making education for children with certain disabilities compulsory.<sup>22</sup> The current models and methods of public education still reflect a time when education was designed to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of the community in an age where the general population was still largely illiterate and innumerate.

The current curriculum include teaching of societal and vocational skills, in Queensland there is a ‘common curriculum’ whose role is to provide a comprehensive education for all students during the

<sup>20</sup> *Education Queensland’s Placement Policy and Process: A report by Queensland Parents of People with Disability Inc, QPPD, 2001. P33*

<sup>21</sup> *The Taming of the Shrew, Shakespeare, William, Act 1 Scene 1.*

<sup>22</sup> *Attachment 1, Brief 7, Inclusive Curriculum, Ministerial Taskforce for Students with Disabilities, March 2003*

compulsory years of schooling. It consists of eight nationally agreed key learning areas for Year 1 to 10.<sup>23</sup>

Some of these subjects take the student (or learner, to use current descriptors) not only out from behind the desk, but indeed, out of the classroom and into the community into work education, designed to prepare students for particular work environments and perhaps embracing the notion that school communities reflect and are part of the community within which the school exists. Perhaps the existing models for the delivery of modern curricula need to make this a bolder shift from the “chalk and talk” method to an alternative, less formal and more active form of instruction, which reflects the changing role of education in our society and prepares our children by developing the life-long learning skills so valued by today’s society.

All parents of children with disability want, is for their children to have the same opportunities to develop their skills and abilities, to realise their full potential and to be recognised as valued, contributing members of today’s society.

The Productivity Commission Inquiry into the DDA in its findings concludes students with disabilities should have the same choices in education as all other students have:

*In the interests of reducing discrimination and promoting integration in education, the Productivity Commission considers that a general objective of government education funding arrangements should be to ensure school students with disabilities have the same range of education choices that other students have. Their choice of school sector should only be subject to the same personal factors-such as location, income and education needs as other students.*

Civil society has a duty to provide opportunities for all its citizens which are fair, just and equitable. The formidable constraints that parents and students with disabilities encounter when exercising choice as highlighted in this report, act as barriers to inclusion and are unfair, unjust and inequitable. We call upon Education Queensland to consider this report and provide answers to the questions raised by this study.

***Nobody recognises the dignity of the child, nobody recognises the journey of the parent or the difficulties the parents face. These are beautiful, beautiful little children and life is hard and a struggle for them every day from when they come into the world. You go along and you get there and then you want to enrol your child at the school, they have special needs and then you start the whole thing off. “What’s wrong with your child?” My children aren’t broken I do not want them fixed. I want you to recognise their potential. They are beautiful human beings, I don’t want you to fix them I want you to teach them.***

**- Parent**

<sup>23</sup> Queensland Studies Authority, *Pre-publication syllabus – July 2003*, State of Queensland (Office of Queensland Studies Authority), 2003. P5





**4. When you were choosing a school, who, if anyone, influenced your decision?** Please tick one or more of the following:

No-one – own choice  
 Friends, family  
 Other parents  
 Inspired by something you heard or read  
 Teachers, education staff, guidance officer  
 SEDU staff  
 Doctors, early intervention therapists etc  
 Only choice offered  
 Other (please explain)

**About resolving issues at school**

**1. Who brings up any issues?** Please tick one or more of the following:

Principal  
 Teacher  
 Teacher Aide  
 District Office  
 Student  
 Self  
 Other parents

**2. How are issues resolved?** Please tick one or more of the following:

We do not resolve issues  
 I don't tell them we have issues  
 Always involve me  
 Sometimes involve me  
 Resolves without my involvement  
 Involves professional advice sometimes  
 Always involves professional advice  
 They don't tell me we have issues  
 We resolve issues by joint actions

**3. If you could not resolve an issue, who would you go to?** Please tick one or more of the following:

Teacher  
 Principal  
 Guidance Officer  
 District  
 Minister  
 Other (please explain)

**4. Would you consider using an independent complaints process?**

YES/NO

**5. If you could improve aspects of your child's education, what would you like to change?** Please tick one or more of the following:  
 Please use the following space for any further comments.

Greater emphasis on learning  
 Social skills/membership of the school community  
 Protection from bullying/abuse  
 Safety  
 More resources (teacher aides, additional equipment, teachers)  
 More skilled staff in classroom  
 More information and feedback  
 Better skilled teaching staff  
 Move to another school  
 Other (please explain)

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

QPPD will be conducting a series of focus groups around Queensland in June. The purpose of the focus groups is to explore further how parents make the decisions around the school choice for a child with a disability. QPPD will produce a report based on this survey and the information collected from the focus groups. If you would like to take part in a focus group about this topic, please contact Sharyn Pacey at QPPD on 1800 805 184 or fill in your contact details below.

**All personal information collected by QPPD through this survey is confidential and will be treated with respect.**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Tel No : \_\_\_\_\_ Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

Please return to QPPD by **26 May 2003**. A reply paid envelope is enclosed or post your response to: QPPD, Reply Paid 470, PADDINGTON QLD 4064.

## **Appendix B – Focus Group – (list of participants)**

### **Summary of Focus Group Participants**

1. Mother of 7 year old son with intellectual disability attending a local state primary school in a regular class.
2. Mother of 8 year old son with physical disability attending a local state primary school.
3. Mother of 8 year old son with intellectual disability/hearing impairment attending a state primary school.
4. Mother of 8 year old son with ASD attending a state primary school enrolled in special education unit yet mainstreamed into regular class.
5. Mother of 9 year old son with ASD attending a state primary school after being expelled from first school.
6. Mother of 9 year old son with intellectual disability attending a private primary school in regular class.
7. Mother of 10 year old daughter with intellectual disability attending a local state primary school in a regular class.
8. Mother of 10 year old son with speech language impairment/dyspraxia attending a private primary school in regular class.
9. Mother of 10 year old son with ASD attending a state primary school in a regular class.
10. Mother of 10 year old son with physical disability attending a state primary school in a special education unit.
11. Mother of 11 year old son with visual/physical impairment attending a state primary school in a special education unit.
12. Mother of 11 year old son with intellectual disability attending a state primary school in a special education unit.
13. Father of 12 year old son with physical impairment/visual impairment/intellectual disability/ASD attending a state special school.
14. Mother of 13 year old son with Aspergers attending a private high school in a regular class.
15. Mother of 13 year old son with ASD attending a state high school in a special education unit.
16. Mother of 13 year old son with ASD/childhood schizophrenia attending a state primary school in a special education unit.
17. Father of 14 year old daughter with physical/intellectual disability attending state special school.
18. Mother of 14 year old son with intellectual disability attending a private high school in regular class.
19. Mother of 15 year old daughter with intellectual disability attending a local state high school in a special education unit.
20. Mother of 15 year old daughter with hearing loss/speech language impairment attending a local state high school.
21. Mother of 16 year old son with aspergers/disassociative identity disorder attending a state high school in a special education unit and 6 year old son with aspergers/obsessive compulsive disorder/gluten intolerant in a regular class.
22. Mother of 16 year old son with ASD attending a state special school.
23. Mother of 16 year old daughter with intellectual disability attending a private high school in regular class.
24. Mother of 17 year old son with intellectual impairment attending a local state high school in a special education unit.
25. Mother of 17 year old son with ASD attending a private high school in a regular class.
26. Mother of 18 year old son with speech language impairment attending a private alternative high school.

## **Appendix C - Questions For Focus Groups**

### **Can you talk a little about why you chose this school?**

Why this choice? What choices were you offered as to where your child went to school? What choices were identified? What other influences were brought to bear in where your son/daughter goes to school? Also did your child use respite services prior to going to school and how did this influence your decision?

### **Before your son or daughter went to school, what did you think it was going to be like?**

What did you expect? What expectations did you have for son/daughter schooling prior to them attending school? (educational, social, emotional, physical, developmental – could ask people to rate these?). Before you had a child with a disability, what did you think was the 'best place' for the education of children with a disability – special school, institution, SEU, ordinary school.

### **Who did you seek advice from or were there other things or people who influenced your choice?**

Who made the choice? Who contributed to the decision-making around where your son/daughter goes to school? What other influences were brought to bear in where your son/daughter goes to school?

### **What do you think could be done to improve things for your child and your family?**

How could things be improved? What expectations do you have now of schooling? (educational, social, emotional, physical, developmental)? Do you think there should be an independent complaints mechanism?

### **Knowing what you now know about schooling, would your choice be different?**

### **If your child did not have a disability, would they be attending this school?**