

STAR NEWSLETTER

From the Board

The first STAR Board meeting this year saw the following persons elected as office bearers for 2011

President – Gabrielle Dickenson

Vice President - Jane Hauser (acting)

Treasurer – Cynthia Pilli

Dr. Phillip Graves, James Henry, Loretta Krelle, Helen McFarlane and Fiona Rowsell, who were elected at the AGM in December last year join continuing Board Members Emmy Elbaum, Jenny Harrison, Alex Rowsell and Janice Slattery to give us the full complement of 12 .

As noted in the Annual Report last year, concern about the expansion and growth of segregated educational settings has been identified as an area for targeted action. To this end at its February meeting the Board decided to aggressively pursue a campaign to inform the Victorian Community of the truth about segregated education and the inferior impact on the learning potential and life opportunities of students, when compared to inclusive schooling, by exposing the true consequences of segregation and by opening minds to what is possible when all children are included in regular schools (*see article on page 3 which should get you thinking about this*).

We are currently exploring with key people with experience in successful community campaigns to determine what needs to happen to undertake such a campaign, including the initial considerations to be aware of such as potential blockers or barriers as well as a range of useful strategies and options. *Your suggestions are very welcome. Contact our Executive Officer, Esther Harris at the STAR office or at esther@starvictoria.org.au.*

We have also been busy responding to both the Victorian Law Reform Commission's Guardianship Legislation Review Consultation Paper and the Federal Government's Review of Disability Education standards and their Review of Education Funding.

STAR representatives have also attended public meetings on in relation to the Coalition Government's "Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children" Inquiry and the National Disability Insurance Scheme. STAR has signed up as a supporter to "Every Australian Counts" Campaign.

We have included an insert with this Newsletter which provides some background information to the NDIS and suggestions for how you might become involved in the campaign.

It is timely to remind you that membership and newsletter subscriptions for 2010/2011 are now due. A renewal form is enclosed. Your attention to this and any additional support you may be able to offer is much appreciated. Please note – you can now pay by direct deposit if you prefer. Please refer to the information on the forms.

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Meet 2 of our new Board members

Helen McFarlane

I have had an almost lifelong interest in promoting the rights of those in our families and communities who have disabilities. I have both personal experience and an understanding of dealing with a family member with multiple and complex needs. My son, who had Cerebral Palsy, later developed Schizophrenia and disappeared ten years ago during a psychotic episode.

Having taught in a variety of school settings, from primary to secondary school and at university level, both in Australia and overseas, I also appreciate both the challenges and *opportunities* for a teacher with a class of 25 plus students all with a diverse range of individual and /or special needs.

Raising awareness of people with disabilities and their rights remains an issue with some across all school systems and indeed in the community at large, which is seemingly unable or unwilling to make many of the necessary accommodations to provide equitable outcomes for all

I am pleased to be able to support the work of STAR in whatever small way I can through advocacy work on behalf of families who so often are battling for their sons and daughters with an intellectual disability and by contributing to the work of the STAR Board.

James Henry

My special interest is the communication needs of people with little or no speech – AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication).

I have a 9 year old son, who is autistic, has intellectual disability and has little speech.

I've been his main teacher and advocate since he was about 1 year old. Our disturbing story with special education started before he was 3. He attended 'early intervention' at an SDS. Our experiences included repeated attempts to undermine parent/child relationships, the exclusion of parents from having any input into the programs, and the wearing down of parents' hopes and expectations for their children.

The next SDS/special school refused to support his fragile emerging communication skills, which were mainly signing at that stage, although later he also used communication pages and devices, which the school also didn't support. As I tried to advocate for him, I experienced bullying and victimisation, to which as a separated parent I am more vulnerable. For 6 years now he has been denied his communication methods and treated like an idiot. That's not 'education!' All I can do is keep on teaching him at home and try to get him out of special so called 'education'.

I worked for four years as a bus driver for a large organisation running Day centres for people with intellectual disabilities. I also organised my own activities with the clients. From my observations the culture of some adult services reflects my experiences in special schools in the way they isolate, exclude, have lower expectations, and dis-empower clients and parents and feed them with spin.

I believe the special/segregated industry is systematically failing people on a massive scale - particularly those with autism.

The best of times followed segregation – given a few hiccups here and there!

During the early eighties, it seemed that all Victorian teachers and school communities, were debating ‘integration’. (the name used at that time, for the practice of children with disabilities attending mainstream schools.) The Government of the day, sought to address the educational limitations of special education and made funds available to the student and school, who enrolled and accepted children with disability into their midst. Our eldest son was the same age as his Grade 6 peers. Whilst the non-disabled students were going to have all the learning opportunities that secondary schools offered, our son would not – just more of the same isolation, together with his special school class mates, who had little language, ‘behaviour problems’ personal hygiene issues etc. and not a non-disabled student in sight. After much fear and trepidation, we decided to take a leap of faith and try ‘integration.’ After all, he could always go back if the predicted ‘persecution into the ground’ outcome happened. Within a very short space of time, we observed a huge spike in his learning – interaction with others, and his own personal sense of self and self respect. Surrounded by ‘normal’ peers and expectations and thus immersed in the ‘lingo’ and culture of just being a teenager, why should we have been so surprised?

Never before or since, has there been a decision we have made for any of our children that has been so right.

Luckily for us, this was at a time when word was out! No Government since, has embraced real inclusion with the same conviction.

When I look at my son now there is no doubt in my mind that these years in the mainstream school provided him with opportunities and choices (previously non-existent) that changed his life - from someone who, over a life-time, would have been constantly dependant on support services, he is now a non-dependant taxpaying man, with a lifestyle not dissimilar to his brother and sisters - working in regular mainstream employment, living independently in his own home and managing a mortgage!

It breaks my heart, that it seems many families now, have missed out on hearing, what has to be the best kept secret to education and opportunity.

“Your Say, Your Rights”

A Project of Information Exchange and Technological Innovation

‘Victorian Women’s Benevolent Trust has funded Victorian Women with Disabilities Network in partnership with the Self Advocacy Resource Unit to speak with women about identifying how to sustain social support and information opportunities for isolated women with disabilities by utilising advances in technology. It is well established that women with disabilities in general experience significant barriers to participation in community life including employment, education, access to services, friendship and community involvement. Women who have deaf blindness, intellectual disability, acquired brain injury and complex communication are identified as particularly isolated and experience extreme forms of discrimination. This project aims to take some first steps in addressing the issues identified by women in accessing key technological advances which can be used to reduce isolation. The project will run a series of information exchange workshops for women with specific disabilities providing opportunities to learn about and try new technologies and receive accessible information through round table discussions.

For further information contact project worker:
Chris Jennings (03) 9639-6856

saruchris@rosshouse.org.au Tuesday and Thursdays.

More food for thought about segregation – Extract from World Down Syndrome Day speech
Queensland Liberal Senator, Sue Boyce in a speech to the Australian Parliament on 23rd March, 2011 criticised the existing practice of separating people with impairments from the rest of society. To combat this ‘silo-isolation’, the former journalist suggested integrating youngsters with disabilities into mainstream education.

‘I am a very, very strong advocate of closing down all our special schools and moving all the resources of the special schools into the mainstream schools,’ she told the Senate today.

‘This is the only way that we will, long term, push inclusive schooling and therefore real inclusion into the education system... Without inclusive education there is a big chunk missing out of what a good life for a person with a disability would involve, even if we do adopt a national disability insurance scheme.

Senator Boyce used her Matter of Public Importance speech to refute suggestions that children with disabilities faced bullying if they studied at a mainstream school.

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I put forward the view that we should simply move all the resources from special schools into the mainstream education area a couple of years ago and what surprised me was the number of people who objected, not because they thought special schooling was better or that special education was better, but because children with disabilities would be bullied in the mainstream. To me this was a very strange way of dealing with a symptom. I would have thought that, if children with disabilities were being bullied in the mainstream education system, you needed to do something about the mainstream education system. Over and over people would say to me, ‘It’s bad enough for the kids without disabilities being bullied. It’s awful for the children with disabilities.’ Surely this says there is something wrong with our system rather than this is a reason to exclude children with disabilities. It also ignores the fact, of course, that bullying can just as easily go on in special schools as it does anywhere else. It is a symptom of our humanity rather than a symptom of inclusive education. I continue to suggest that we need to really re-analyse the way we are approaching inclusive education.
Full text of Senator Boyce speech is available at the STAR office.