

Ms McKEW (Benelong—Parliamentary Secretary for Early Childhood Education and Childcare) (4.43 pm)—I rise today to commend the imaginative initiative and the extraordinary commitment of the parents and staff at Giant Steps in Gladesville, a school for children with autism, which is located in my electorate in Benelong.

Two weeks ago I visited Giant Steps and met Sean, a little boy who is aged 11. He has been at Giant Steps since he was five years of age. Sean was in a classroom with seven other students and with not one but three teachers. This little boy is likely to move to an integrated support unit within a regular high school when he is 12. Students who are not able to make that transition remain at Giant Steps and they continue to study a modified New South Wales high school curriculum.

Kerrie Nelson, the principal of Giant Steps, walked me through the classrooms explaining the school's interdisciplinary approach to teaching, an approach which involves a special education teacher, an occupational therapist, a music therapist and sometimes a teacher's aide—and they are all working together in the classroom at the same time. The regular curriculum is adjusted to provide a very rich and authentic learning experience with autism friendly teaching strategies. It is this interdisciplinary approach that is so effective when working with children who are as challenged as autistic children are.

There are 60 children at Giant Steps. They range in age from preschoolers to 17-year-olds. They come from all over the metropolitan area, some travelling very long distances—sometimes two hours—to get there and they are taught by 52 dedicated staff. Just think of that ratio: 60 children to 52 staff.

Giant Steps was established in July 1995 by a group of parents who researched the world's best practice for teaching children with autism, and they continue to strive to create as normal a school life as possible. Understandably, it costs a lot more to provide this kind of quality education for children such as Sean than it does at a normal school. From an annual budget of nearly \$4 million, \$1.9 million comes from state and federal funding, \$750,000 comes from corporate and other donations, a staggering \$450,000 is donated by the parents of the children who attend the school and a further \$800,000 comes from fundraising activities. It is an extraordinary effort.

The current challenge facing the parent body from Giant Steps is to provide a post-school life for these children. Barry Irvin, the chairman of the Giant Steps board, explained to me and my colleague the honourable member for Maribyrnong that the plan is to design a tertiary educational experience approximating that for any 18-year-old so that all students in Australia have the right to participate in a stimulating, quality educational experience in an appropriate environment.

At a time when the government is committing \$190 million to a range of services that will help families with autism—that is, in addition to six specialist autism centres—I commend Giant Steps. I find it encouraging to see the exceptional effort and imagination of the parents and the teachers who are making Giant Steps the centre of excellence that it is.