



**Advice to the Assistant Minister for Social Services**

**Policy on the National Assessment Program – Literacy and  
Numeracy (NAPLAN) for Deaf People in Australia**

September 2014

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## 1. Introduction

Deaf Australia believes there are significant gaps and opportunities for deaf children undertaking National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) as equally as others. This issue has been discussed within the deaf sector for a long time, which indicates significant concerns shared by deaf members of the sector, their parents and teachers of the deaf.

The NAPLAN participation rate of deaf and hard of hearing children has historically been low, due predominately to two factors. The first is that of minimal support, such as the provision of Auslan/ English interpreters to assist the student when taking the exam. The second is that schools often deter deaf students from participating if they believe that students will achieve sub-standard results. This is because their participation will ultimately drag down the average score of the school, making it appear less attractive on the My Schools website (*Deaf Australia, 2013*).

In 2008, the Victorian Council of Deaf People (now known as Deaf Victoria) conducted thorough research into Deaf Education in Victoria that led to the establishment of the Victorian Deaf Education Institute under the Victorian Government Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. In this report, the issue of NAPLAN was highlighted and is consistent with the findings of the survey conducted for this policy advice paper.

Deaf Australia is concerned that in the system and processes for deaf children, a fair opportunity to participate in the process so to gauge their academic knowledge comparable with their peers is inconsistent across Australia. The interpretation of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) guidelines is subjective and dependent on what resources/skills are available for a deaf child at the time of testing, and at discretion of schools.

Deaf Australia believes that the provision of necessary and adequate support to deaf children to enable them to actively participate in the assessment on an equal basis with their peers needs to be enhanced and consistent.

*For reference, this paper will use 'deaf' as a blanket term covering all hearing levels of a person who has a hearing loss, irrespective of communication modality used.*

### Facts:

- Over 17,000 families in Australia have a child who has a hearing loss and is fitted with hearing devices (Australian Hearing, 2013)
- 91% of South Australian deaf and hard of hearing children are educated in mainstreamed settings. (Deaf Australia, 2013).

Note: at the time of preparing this advice, data for students attending mainstream education in other parts of Australia has not been publicly released.

Note: Australian Hearing will have data that explains a child's level of hearing loss (e.g., mild, moderate, severe or profound). The information was not readily available when preparing this advice.

## 1.1 Background

What does the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability* say?

The UN CRPD says what should happen so that the human rights of people with disability are respected. It talks about a wide range of issues such as equality, accessibility, freedom from abuse, education, freedom of speech, opinion and representation.

Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states:

1. States Parties recognise the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realising this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed to:
  - a) The full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity.
2. In realising this right, States Parties shall ensure that:
  - c) Reasonable accommodation of the individual's requirements is provided;
  - d) Persons with disabilities receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education;
3. States Parties shall enable persons with disabilities to learn life and social development skills to facilitate their full and equal participation in education and as members of the community. To this end, States Parties shall take appropriate measures, including;
  - a) Facilitating the learning of Braille, alternative script, augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication and orientation and mobility skills, and facilitating peer support and mentoring;
  - b) Facilitating the learning of sign language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the deaf community.

The UN CRPD also talks about the importance of consulting and including disabled people in decision making that affects them, and the importance of education of children with disability (*Article 4.3*).

What does the ***National Disability Strategy*** say?

‘People with disability must be afforded the same rights as all other Australians. Australia formally recognised this by ratifying the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability in 2008, and acceding to its Optional Protocol in 2009. People with disability are citizens with rights, not objects of charity.’

‘The idea of the National Disability Strategy is to improve the responsiveness of Australia’s policies in areas such as health, education, employment support, housing and income support. Australia’s performance in these areas for people with disability continues to lag well behind achievements for the rest of the population.’

For the purpose of this paper, we refer to policy area #5: ***Learning and Skills*** of the National Disability Strategy. The outcome of this area is:

*‘People with disability achieve their full potential through their participation in an inclusive high quality education system that is responsive to their needs. People with disability have opportunities to continue learning throughout their lives’.*

**Policy Direction 1:** Strengthen the capability of all education providers to deliver inclusive high quality educational programs for people with all abilities from early childhood through adulthood.

**Policy Direction 2:** Focus on reducing the disparity in educational outcomes for people with a disability and others.

**Policy Direction 3:** Ensure that government reform and initiatives for early childhood, education, training and skill developments are responsive to the needs of people with disability.

**Policy Direction 4:** Improve pathways for students with disability from school to further education, employment and lifelong learning.

***Deaf Australia was founded in 1986 and to date, there has been no consultation with our organisation from the Commonwealth Government regarding the issue of NAPLAN.***

## 1.2 Purpose

There is a need to collect evidence-based data on literacy and numeracy for deaf children in Australia. Following consultations with parents, teachers and schools, there appear to be fewer deaf students participating in the NAPLAN assessment at Year 3, 5, 7 and 9 levels.

Deaf students do not have easy access to the phonological code of spoken language, i.e. English in Australia. Marschark and Harris (1996) explained that natural sign languages, such as American Sign Language (ASL), have their own vocabularies, morphologies, and syntaxes, which do not parallel those of spoken languages or printed English. This also applies for Auslan, the natural sign language of the Deaf community in Australia. PARA (2011) in their brief report on Assessment of Students who are deaf suggested that deaf students are also “English language learners and therefore they may need accommodations that are typically provided for students with limited English proficiency as well”. However the kind of support needed varies depending on the individual needs of the deaf child – some may not be fluent in the spoken language/printed language (English), or the visual language, Auslan, due to a delay or lack of access to language acquisition at an early age.

There is a need to establish a cohort of all deaf students in Australia to track their performance and skills in literacy and numeracy.

Although it is a language based assessment, there is a need to provide visual clarity of the questions – this may include rephrasing the questions in a way that students understand what is required of them before answering the questions.

National evidence based data such as NAPLAN will assist teachers in tailoring programs to enhance deaf and hard of hearing students’ learning needs, comprehension and skills in literacy and numeracy. It will also provide guidelines to parents and school administrators in reviewing adequate support services for deaf students especially in the early and middle years of schooling.

## 1.3 National Relevance

- Australian Education Act (2013)
- Disability Discrimination Act – Education Standards (2005)
- National Disability Strategy (*Learning and Skills*) (2010-2020)
- National Education Reform Agreement (2013)
- Students First (Department of Education)
- Schools Assistance Act (2008)

***There is no national aggregate score for deaf children undertaking the NAPLAN assessment.***

## **1.4 Relevance to Government**

### **Department of Education**

NAPLAN falls under the scope of the Department of Education and state/territory governments in delivering the assessment.

### **Department of Social Services**

The Department of Social Services is responsible for the National Disability Strategy that has overarching roles with relevant Departments and the implementation of the National Disability Strategy.

The National Disability Strategy sets out a ten years national plan for improving life for Australians with disabilities and its purpose is to:

- Establish a high level policy framework to give coherence to, and guide government activity across mainstreamed and disability-specific areas of public policy
- Drive improved performance of mainstreamed services in delivering outcomes for people with disability
- Give visibility to disability issues and ensure they are included in the development and implementation of all public policy that impacts on people with disability
- Provide national leadership towards greater inclusion of people with disability.

### **Council of Australian Governments (COAG)**

The Council of Australian Governments is the peak intergovernmental forum in Australia comprising of elected leaders of the Commonwealth, state and territory governments and the Australian Local Government Association.

The council has eight (8) Councils that focus on COAG's priorities, and for the purpose of this paper, we refer to two councils; these are:

- Disability Reform Council
- Education Council

## **2. Issues and Impacts**

Data that is collected by ACARA does not include information in relation to the granting of disability adjustments for students by Test Administration Authority (TAA) and the nature of a student's disability might not necessarily be recorded, but only the details of adjustment made available to the student by TAA.

Deaf Australia distributed a questionnaire to its members and others in the community. Deaf and hard of hearing people were invited to respond but the main target was parents of deaf children. The survey did not specify which group a deaf person belongs to; for example, use Auslan, total communication or oral (speech) only.

Deaf Australia sent letters to state and territory assessment coordinators and asked the following questions:

- Level of information and support available for deaf and hard of hearing children to participate in the assessment.
- Whether your office holds information about deaf and hard of hearing assessment and support provided; and
- Any additional information we can access to formulate a position paper.

The Early Intervention and Education Summit Report (2013) were attached to the letter.

### **2.1 Summary of findings**

Deaf Australia developed a survey using the Survey Monkey tool and distributed it through our networks.

The primary focus of the survey was parents of deaf hard of hearing children.

Fifty (50) responses were received, but not all respondents answered every question.

- 0 % from Northern Territory
- 42 % from New South Wales
- 8 % from Queensland
- 18 % from South Australia
- 0 % from Tasmania
- 26 % from Victoria; and
- 4 % from Western Australia.

#### **Type of schools attended:**

- 69.39 % (33) of respondents said their deaf child attends a government school
- 30.61 % (15) of respondents said their deaf child attends a private school (2 did not respond)



**Of the Government schools:**

- 32.35% have a deaf support program
- 58.82% have a visiting teacher program
- 8.82% receive no support.

**Of the Private schools:**

- 20.00% have a deaf support program
- 33.33% have a visiting teacher program
- 46.67% receive no support.

A summary of deaf children against year levels and their potential participation (in pink) and actual participation (in blue) is outlined in Figures 1 to 3. Note some respondents' children are in secondary school and can participate in more than one assessment, e.g., a child in Year 8 will have had a chance to participate in 3 assessments (Year 3, 5 and 7).

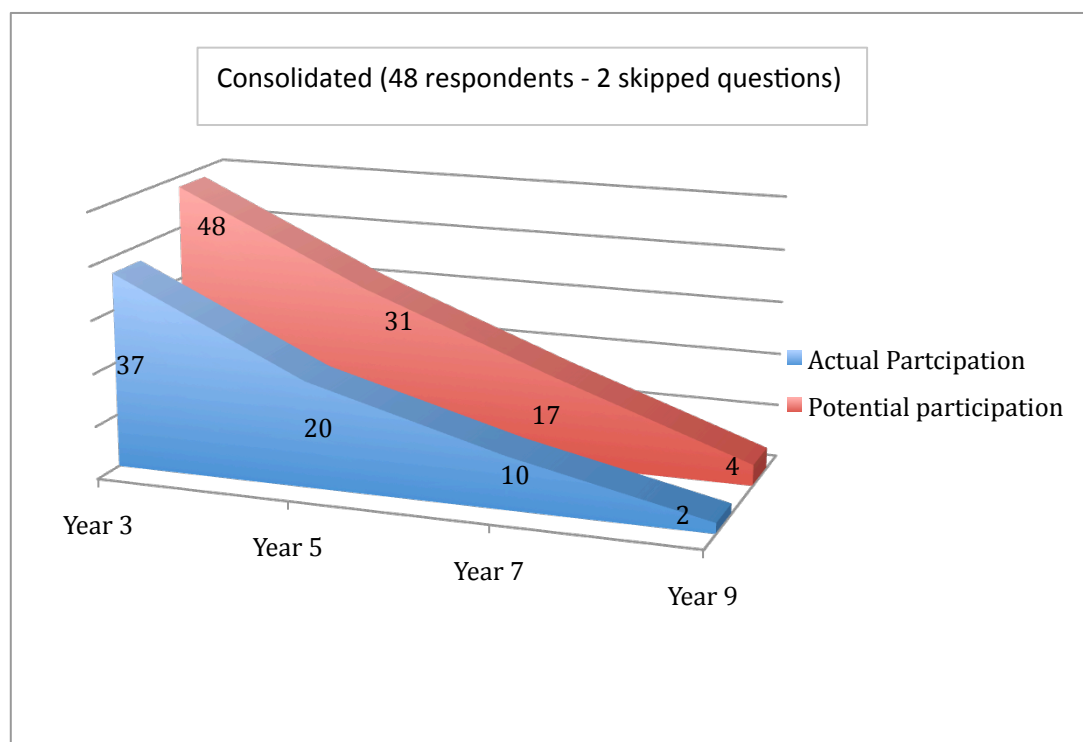


Figure 1: consolidated report on all respondents in both government and private education systems.

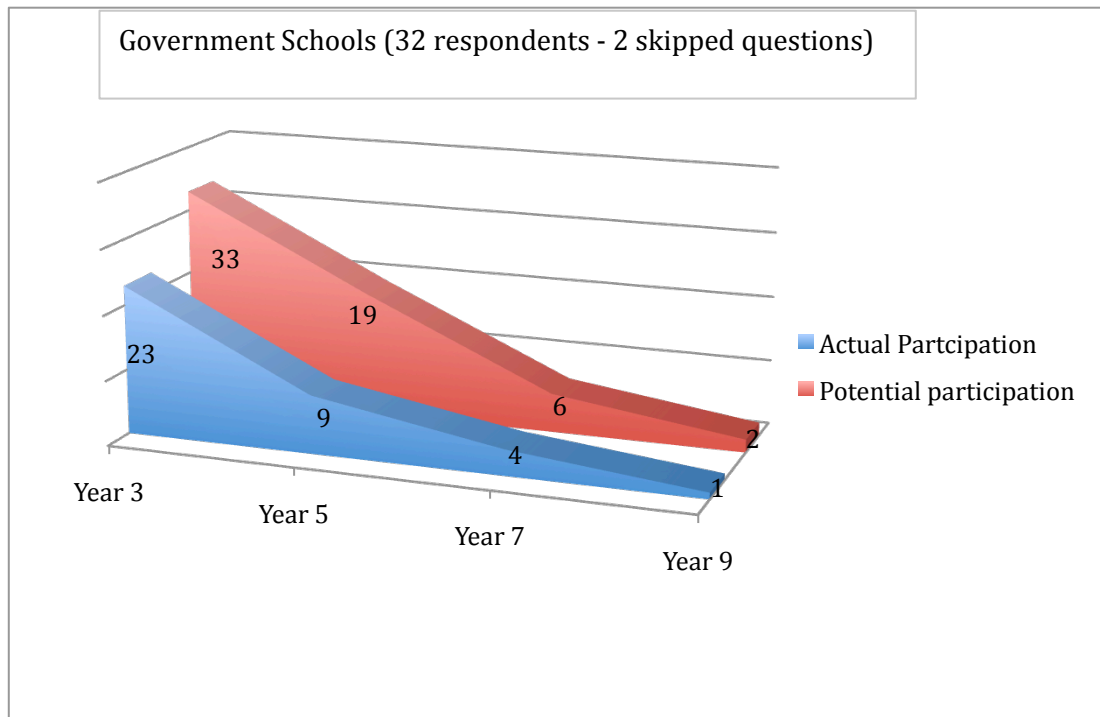


Figure 2: Summary report of all respondents attending Government schools.

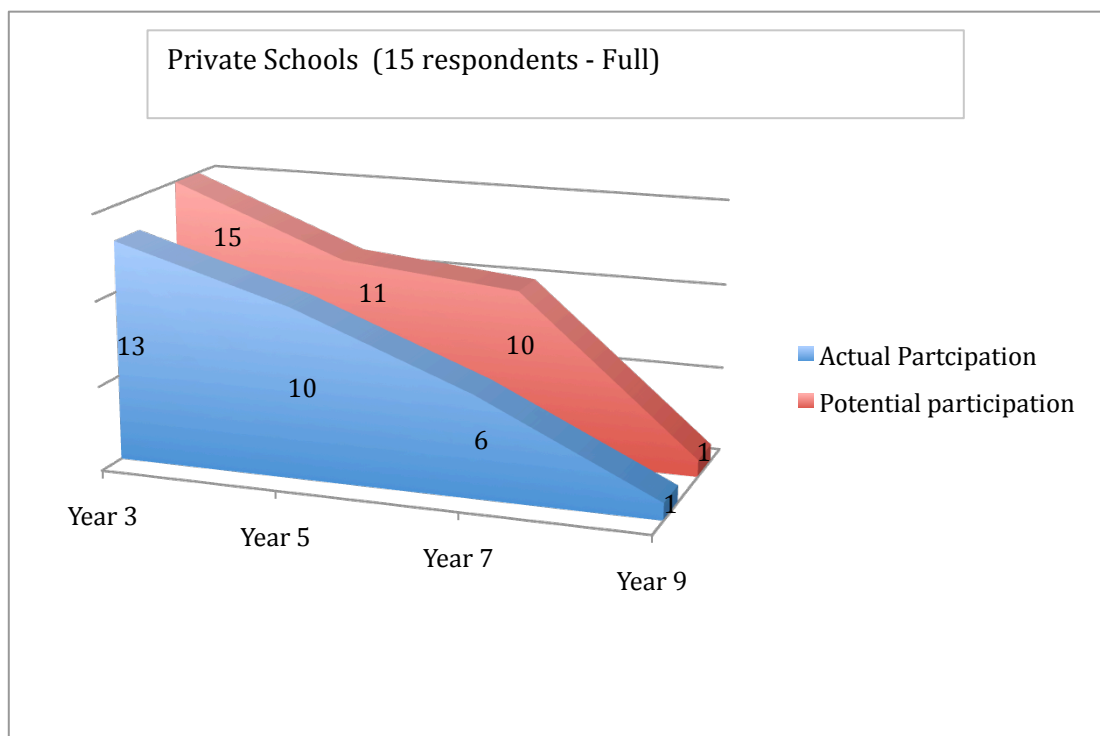


Figure 3: Summary report of all respondents attending Private schools.

## 2.2 Issues

Deaf Australia is concerned about the lack of adequate information and support for deaf children to undertake the assessment. 36.73% (18 of 49 respondents) approached their child's school about their concerns in relation to their deaf child sitting the standardised government education test. 47.92 % were not aware that support could be provided.

Comments made by parents:

- No one really cares about deaf children in private schools, if the parents don't push for additional support and request help from agencies, they get left behind.
- They did not want her to take the test, as she would bring the school results down.
- It was suggested she complete the NAPLAN in separate room from other children and that she be given more time.
- They were concerned the test would be overwhelming for my son and beyond his current level of understanding.
- Concerns were raised that staff were not allowed to assist in the interpretation from English to Auslan for my child to sit the test, It was decided without this translation available there was no point in our child sitting the test as she has limited understanding of English.
- First time though grade three my children were not at a level of literacy that they could read the test so the teacher wanted to excuse them.

Asked whether support was provided:

51.22 % (or 21 respondents) said their child received support  
48.78 % (or 20 respondents) did not receive support.

Asked what support/s was provided (some responses were similar), respondents said:

- Teacher provides clarifications during the assessment
- Support teacher sat with the student during the testing
- Test carried out in a separate room, but no additional time given
- Extra time (in same room or separately)
- Note taker and interpreter was provided
- Sat alone in separate room

### 2.3 Impacts

Deaf Australia is concerned about the lasting impacts of deaf children undertaking NAPLAN assessments with little or no support. Deaf and hard of hearing children's literacy levels are generally lower than their hearing peers (Allen, 1986; Luckner et al, 2005-2006). It seems to be common practice for schools to seek exemption for deaf children from taking assessments for three main reasons:

1. Concerns about the deaf child's wellbeing and ability to cope with stress;
2. Concerns that the deaf child's scores will not reflect well in the school's overall scores; and
3. Concerns about the impact on the deaf child's confidence when comparing their scores against their peers.

Some comments from parents:

- My child did not undertake Year 7 NAPLAN because he was far behind in skills needed to take the test.
- My child has a number of problems; she became very stressed and does not always understand written instructions, so she did not participate in the assessment.
- She was worried about test for weeks and she felt that if teachers pull her aside and feels she is unable to complete the test she will be exempted.
- Although (name supplied) was fully prepared, I asked for concept to be taught in Auslan but was refused, he performed poorly.
- I would rather not my child to participate in at all, even with itinerant teacher sitting in they are only able to support and so much which is not that supportive – so she ends up getting below average marks and felt really dumb.

Based on ACARA's guidelines, participant who may be exempted from undertaking the assessments are:

**English language proficiency:** Students with a language background other than English who arrived from overseas and have been attending school for less than a year before the test may be exempted. However, these students are not automatically exempt and should be given the opportunity to participate in testing. Principals can expect information from Test Administration Authorities on the preferred method for collecting and recording this information. Students may be exempt from one test (e.g. Literacy) but still be able to participate in other test (e.g. Numeracy).

**Students with disability:** Adjustments are provided to students with disability to support access to the tests and encourage maximum participation. Students with significant intellectual disability and/ or those with significant co-existing conditions that severely limit their capacity to participate in the tests may be exempted from sitting the national tests. This is determined after consultation has occurred between the principal and the relevant parent/ carer, and if it is decided the student is not able to access the test with adjustments.

(Source: <http://www.nap.edu.au/naplan/school-support/student-participation.html>)

An example of adjustments provided to a person with ‘hearing disabilities’

Case Study:

John\* (not real name) is in Year 7 and is profoundly deaf and is fluent in Auslan. He has no difficulties in reading and writing and regularly uses support teacher (who specialises in Auslan) to confirm instructions relating to his classroom learning and assessment.

Adjustment provided:

Oral/ signed support only.

Extra time or scribe not provided.

Additional notes:

As John has no difficulties reading and writing, and is fluent in Auslan, the provision of extra time was deemed not applicable in this case. However, in other cases extra times may be required depending on the fluency of oral signage of the teacher and student in question, and whether the student requires the test instructions to be repeated throughout the test.

(Source: [http://www.nap.edu.au/naplan/school-support/adjustments-for-students-with-disability/disability-adjustments-scenarios.html#\\_Toc287867536](http://www.nap.edu.au/naplan/school-support/adjustments-for-students-with-disability/disability-adjustments-scenarios.html#_Toc287867536))

Deaf Australia has an earlier correspondence (Lloyd, 2013) with the Manager of Assessment and Reporting of National Assessment Program, who advised:

*‘There are specific provisions in relation to grounds for exemption. They relate to language background and severe disability. Withdrawal of students is normally done for (we are advised) educational philosophical grounds, or where there is a concern for the psychological well being of the students’.*

The manager also advised the following:

*‘ACARA is not in a position to advise whether or not students with hearing impairment are being discouraged from sitting the tests, though, through my position, I have never had such a case reported to me. Nonetheless, I cannot and do not dispute the comment that your organisation (Deaf Australia) view is that participation in the test by this group of students is low’.*

Deaf Australia is also concerned about the lack of coordinated systemic support across Australia for deaf and hard of hearing students in undertaking the assessment.

To find out about the approach by state and territories in coordinating support and/or provision of support, Deaf Australia sent a letter to all state and territory assessment authorities to seek their response to the following questions:

- Level of information and support available for deaf and hard of hearing children to participate in the assessment.
- Whether their office holds information about deaf and hard of hearing assessment/ and support provided; and
- Any additional information we can access to formulate a position paper.

**Response from state/territory assessment coordinators:**

Deaf Australia received 3 responses.

- New South Wales;
- Tasmania; and
- Victoria.

Other states/ territories did not respond.

**New South Wales:**

The Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (BOSTES), which oversees the NAPLAN Assessment in New South Wales, advised us to check with ACARA's website on National Protocols for Test Administrations. They also advised that their department oversees the Higher School Certificate tests and that special provisions may be provided for deaf and hard of hearing children.

**Tasmania:**

Our letter was received by Tasmania's Department of Education's Business Support Services and was delegated to the Acting State Coordinator for Teachers of the Deaf who advised that they would respond within a week.

To date, no further correspondence has been received.

**Victoria:**

The Assessment Project Manager of Victorian Curriculum & Assessment Authority (VCAA) responded and stated:

*VCAA is always concerned to read reports of schools discouraging any students from participating in NAPLAN tests because of concerns about the impact their results may have on the school's results on the My School website.*

*This is a clear breach of the National Protocols for Test Administration – in particular Section 2.1, which states:*

*2.1. NAPLAN is a national assessment, and all students are expected to participate. NAPLAN should be accessible to all students to demonstrate their actual skills and knowledge.*

*2.1.1 Disability adjustment should be granted that are appropriate for students to access and participate in the test.*

*2.1.2 It is not acceptable to exert influence on parents to withdraw their children from testing.*

VCAA also advised that they have developed a NAPLAN [Handbook for Principals](#) and all principals agree to abide by them by signing a *Statement of Compliance* prior to the tests.

All forms of assistances, apart from the use of a scribe, an interactive PDF or assistive technology receive prior approval from VCAA. Adjustments for disabilities are granted at the discretion of the school.

Details of the types of disability adjustments accessed by students for NAPLAN are collected by the VCAA, but such information does not necessarily include the specific disability of the student.

## **2.4 Deaf Australia Survey (2014) and supporting evidence**

In February 2014, Deaf Australia conducted a survey targeting parents of deaf children through our networks and over 50 responses were received.

Information from these responses has been used to inform this document.

Deaf Australia's Early Intervention and Education Summit 2012 report states that a significant number of deaf children's academic knowledge is variable and many of them are performing below their hearing peers, due to various circumstances, such as: educators not adjusting to their learning needs, not having appropriately qualified supports, or receiving little or no support.

This statement appears to be reinforced by comments by parents completing this survey.

***Some of the statements from the parents responding to the survey have shown that schools have breached the National Protocols for Test Administration.***

### 3. Advice to Government / Departments

The overwhelming response from Deaf Australia's Early Intervention and Education Summit (2012), held in Canberra, was that deaf students should be assessed against the same standards as hearing children. This helps governments to understand school's funding needs and at the same time enables parents to understand in what areas their child need to improve (Deaf Australia – 2013).

Deaf Australia calls for the following actions:

- Further investigation by the Department of Education and COAG on the issue of participation of deaf and hard of hearing students in NAPLAN. Reform of the way NAPLAN is provided, supported and reported.

*Links to all policy directions outlined in National Disability Strategy's Policy Area 5; Learning and Skills.*

- Deaf students' scores could be excluded from school's aggregate scores or extra information could be added to indicate the number of deaf students at a school to qualify the results.

*Current NAPLAN reporting already does this for identifying indigenous Australian participants. The recommendation has a high probability of achieving successful outcomes because it does not require any extra funds from government, but rather a simple change in procedure.*

- Increased support for families who have a deaf child to help them navigate the system and to empower parents on what support or services are available and their rights under the Disability Discrimination Act and relevant state/ territory government legislation.

*Links to NDS policy direction 4 of the policy area 5 (Learning and Training) – to improve pathways for student with disability from school to further education, employment and lifelong training.*

- Governments to consult with disability peak organisations to ascertain that the National Disability Strategy is realised in practice, particularly in areas for future actions outlined under Learning and Training in the National Disability Strategy:

- Reduce barriers and simplify access for people with disability to a high quality inclusive education system including early learning, child care, school and further education.
- Investigate options for reporting on educational outcomes of students with disability.



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