

Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee

Background Information: Scope (Vic) Ltd

Scope (Vic) Ltd formerly Spastic Society of Victoria, provides needed supports to children and adults with complex, multiple disabilities and carries particular expertise in working with people with cerebral palsy. Scope provides therapy services into schools to directly support more than 1000 children with disabilities in Victoria. It also provides consultative and educational services to teachers and other professionals who work with children in schools throughout Victoria and interstate. Other key stakeholders in Scope's endeavours are carers, parents, communities, schools, governments, purchasers, sponsors, volunteers and donors.

Scope provides services to over 3,500 people, employs approximately 1500 staff and operates on a balanced budget of over \$40 million. Scope is one of the largest non-government providers of disability services across Victoria.

Scope's Mission

To provide integrated services that enable people with physical and multiple disabilities to achieve their potential in welcoming and inclusive communities.

Scope's Values

To achieve this mission, Scope is committed to ensuring that our services and activities are accountable to clients, meets their needs and promotes their involvement in decision-making. This is achieved by promoting trust through open communication and sharing information.

Scope's values underpin all Scope's current activities and initiatives.

- **Client Focus:** Assisting clients to develop their abilities and achieve their potential by focussing on the goals and needs of each person.
- **Integrity:** Ensuring transparency and accountability, and demonstrating respect in all our relationships, services and programs.
- **Innovation:** Encouraging a culture of creativity
- **Learning:** Fostering organisational and personal growth that is grounded in training, learning and critical reflection.
- **Mutual Support:** Working in a way that emphasises collaboration and partnership, going beyond competition; and understanding that we are stronger together than in isolation.

Scope's Service Approach

Scope was founded to provide, and has provided direct services for clients, their families and carers for over 50 years. The organisation is highly regarded for the expert knowledge and skills developed through its direct service delivery. Scope is also committed to building networks and relationships with other agencies, planners

and providers, thereby enabling people with disabilities to receive services in a coordinated manner that best meets their needs.

Scope, in partnership with the Catholic Education Commission, Victoria (CECV) recently has developed a new model of service provision to students with physical disabilities in CECV schools. This service titled **Therapy in Education-Options 2000** focuses on training and developing skills in key people in the students' environment in order to maximise educational outcomes. A range of innovative services has been provided to schools and families under this model.

Response to Terms of Reference

Scope emphasises the fundamental right of each and every student to access high quality, effective services in order to maximise their learning opportunities and for these services to be provided by appropriately trained professionals. Services need to be available to students with disabilities as well as key people in the students' environment (e.g. teachers, integration aids, family members and other students).

Staff members of Scope wish to respond to the following issues noted in particular **Terms of Reference**.

(i) the criteria used to define disability and to differentiate between levels of handicap

- Scope supports the concept of broadening the definition of disability to accommodate the needs of those students with significant behavioural challenges, learning difficulties and / or mild disabilities.
- Scope wishes to emphasise however that if the definitions of disability are expanded, there is a need to increase the funding available to accommodate the needs of these particular students and to establish new programs to provide greater student support.
- Current funding and services available for students with physical and intellectual disabilities should not be reduced in order to accommodate the expansion of new programs for those students with significant behavioural challenges, learning difficulties and / or mild disabilities.

(ii) the accuracy with which students' disability related needs are being assessed

- Scope considers that there is a significant need for the use of consistent terminology in assessment. Terms used in assessment must be clearly defined and used uniformly across Australia.
- Scope perceives the need for accurate and consistent collection of data across Australia relating to assessment of students' needs and determination of their ongoing requirements.
- Scope believes that accurate assessment as soon as possible is vital. Early identification of needs is essential in order to enhance the future well-being and progress of the student.

- At present across Australia different tools of assessment are being used by organisations, schools and professionals .Scope suggests that these various tools of assessment be analysed and reviewed in order to establish consistent best practice across Australia.
- Scope questions the capacity of some assessment tools currently in use to accurately identify needs and hence determine funding. Inconsistency and inaccuracy in assessment leads to inequitable allocation of funding and places unfair pressure on family resources, in many cases already stretched to the limit.

(iii) the particular needs of students with disabilities from low socio-economic, non-English speaking and Indigenous backgrounds and from rural and remote areas

- Scope believes that the special needs of these students must be addressed, particularly through the provision of information about available services and appropriate financial support.
- Written information must be provided in a user friendly and accessible format and in appropriate languages.
- Educational professionals must be trained to have adequate knowledge and skills about services available (generalist and disability focused) for groups with special needs (e.g families with low socio-economic status) and understand the importance of referring families to appropriate services when required.
- **Association for Children with a Disability** reports that around 30% of requests for assistance to their Parent Support Service relate to educational issues (website www.acd.org.au (April 2002). Scope supports the work of this Association and the vital role the Association plays in the provision of information about services for students and families.

(iv) the effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs

- Scope applauds the extensive research and policy work currently being undertaken in Victoria.
- Scope welcomes the policy initiatives and directions currently being undertaken by the Department of Human Services that focus on community participation for families who have a child with a disability or developmental delay. See **Early Intervention Services in Victoria: The Way Forward 2001- 2005** Department of Human Services.
- Scope emphasises however that despite the excellent work being undertaken in Early Intervention, waiting lists indicate that supply of these services does not satisfy community demand.
- Scope stresses the importance of supporting the family as a whole with the provision of excellent quality services but Scope also emphasises that there is a continuing need for individualised, well-targeted, specialist and specific therapeutic interventions aimed at the impairment and disability experienced by the child.
- Regarding Early Intervention services, there is a need for the development of meaningful outcome measures for families and children.

- There is an urgent need within the sector to develop an equitable and transparent resource allocation tool for the funding of early childhood intervention services. A funding model needs to address not only the needs of the child but also the needs of the family and should take into account the barriers and facilitators to community participation as described in the World Health Organisation's **International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health** (1999) 2nd Edition.
- There is also a need to explore and evaluate alternative models of service delivery to ensure that services are effective and provide choice and alternatives for families.
- Within Early Intervention inequities are occurring regarding the allocation of resources and funding between Service Providers. Such inequities result in variable levels of service provision across Regions. This places unnecessary pressure on some families because their access to services is reduced. This situation needs to be acknowledged and addressed.
- "*Effective intervention demands an individualised approach that matches well-defined goals to the specific needs and resources of the children and families who are served. Interventions of this kind have been shown to be more effective in producing desired child and family outcomes than services that provide generic advice and support*". Shonkoff, Jack P & Deborah A Phillips (2000) **From Neurons to Neighbourhoods: the Science of Early Childhood Development** National Academy Press
- The above quote recognises and emphasises the need for specialist expertise, a valid and reliable resource allocation tool and the implied need for a focus on staff recruitment, retention and training.
- Scope believes that special programs should be introduced to support students in transition from Early Intervention to primary schooling, primary to secondary, and secondary schooling to employment. Families and students need to be supported to plan for and accommodate change between educational settings.
- Educational professionals must encourage all families to become involved in appropriate support groups as early as possible in the life of their child e.g. regionally based Parent Support Groups and family support associations such as the Association for Children with a Disability, based in Victoria.

(v) access to and adequacy of funding and support in both the public and private sectors

- Disability and Impairments (DAI) funding should be reviewed and eligibility expanded to accommodate **all** students attending government, independent and Catholic schools. Without this change, families of children with a disability are limited in their educational options.
- Assessment procedures for those students requiring extra support, should be implemented by an independent and appropriately qualified person who is not directly associated with either the resource allocation system or the school.

(vii) teacher training and professional development

- Scope encourages training and professional development at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels and stresses the importance of including training relating to disability, special education and core principles and values relating to inclusion.
- Training should incorporate significant input from students with disabilities and from their families / carers in order to enhance the understanding of educational professionals. The contribution of families and students should be considered as valuable as expert specialist advice.
- Training should be available for all key individuals involved in the education of the student. As well as training and development at the professional level, the training of parent / family members and volunteer advocates in the educational setting is vital to the well-being and development of the student.
- The issue of transition should be included in the training of both educational professionals, parent / family members and volunteer advocates .
- **Scope** supports the development of networks to service the needs of key individuals involved in the education of students eg teachers, therapists, integration aids, visiting teachers and volunteer advocates. These networks should be established to support **all** schools, government, independent and Catholic thereby encouraging sharing of training, expertise, support and resources at both a local and regional level.

(b) what the proper role of the Commonwealth and States and Territories should be in supporting the education of students with disabilities

- Scope supports the principle of **inclusion** and encourages Commonwealth and state governments to emphasise the obligation of all schools (government, independent and catholic) to recognise the importance of inclusiveness throughout the educational life cycle of each student.
- Scope considers that both Commonwealth and state government enforce the provision and implementation of an **Individual Education Plan (IEP)** for all children with behavioural and / or learning difficulties and / or mild disabilities irrespective of whether the child is receiving Disability and Impairments (DAI) funding.
- Scope encourages the development of **Program Support Groups (PSG)** to benefit all students with special education needs and to encourage effective partnerships between educational professionals and families.