

The Secretary
Senate Employment Work Place Relations & Education References
Committee
Suite S1.61
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

I am a parent of a Year 10 Deaf Child who attends Bendigo Deaf Facility, an Auslan Bi-Lingual program, which covers Deaf Students attending three campuses in Bendigo, Victoria. The three schools involved are:

Kennington Primary School	Yrs P - 6
Golden Square Secondary College	Yrs 7 - 10
Bendigo Senior Secondary College	Yrs 11 - 12

I will reply to some of the points of reference before summarising.

- i) The criteria currently being used to define and differentiate between levels of handicap and Disabilities needs to be looked at on a Disability by Disability basis, then within each Disability the needs should be on an individual basis. Each Disability brings about its own problems and special needs and as Deafness doesn't appear high on the list due to the fact they have no mobility, toileting and other such factors their levels of handicap seem to be reduced therefore not funded as high as other Disabilities. BUT as Deafness creates huge communication and learning difficulties students really need the specialist teaching of trained Teachers of the Deaf (TOD herein) more than Interpreters in lots of cases. As the cost to provide TOD compared to Interpreters is much higher, the funding granted to Deaf children never equates to cover their " Special Teaching" requirements.
- ii) Deaf children who live in the country are definitely disadvantaged. We all know in a " perfect world" each child should be able to stay at their local school, but, unlike children with mobility and other Disabilities who only require Aide assistance, again the need for trained Interpreters and TOD is a huge factor. Without these Specialists, a Deaf child is unable to access communication, therefore unable to reach their full capabilities as a Student. The reality is that it is almost impossible to find Interpreters to work with these Deaf Students in lots of rural and remote communities. TOD have such long distances to travel and so many students to visit spread throughout their huge Regions that the Students are lucky if they get 1 hour a fortnight to oversee their education.

This leaves only a couple of other options for families to consider. For some, the options are so limited that their child has to remain where they are and battle on as best as possible. For other families the option of boarding their child for the school week is the chosen option. Unfortunately in Victoria the only Boarding House still remaining for Deaf children is in Melbourne, where these students must attend a segregated School for the Deaf. Whilst it is a good school, some families would prefer that their child was schooled a little closer to home and

maybe in a supported setting like our Facility here in Bendigo. We ONCE HAD the perfect arrangement for many families wishing to access our Deaf Facility. We offered TOD and Interpreter Services across all three campuses as well as a Family run "Hostel". This Hostel was unfortunately CLOSED by the current State Government 3 years ago as they refused to fund it, stating "children should be educated at their local school".

NOT POSSIBLE DUE TO LACK OF INTERPRETERS AND T.O.D.

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Deaf students also need "Deaf Peers" and our Facility offers this necessary emotional support as so many Deaf students now attend it. We have many families who, because of the Hostel closing, have had to either sell their farms and move here or buy a second house here in Bendigo and half of the family live here Mon-Fri for schooling whilst the other half remain at home. How many families of Hearing children have to make this sacrifice????????? The cost to these families is phenomenal!!!!!!

Another factor for country students is the amount of time many must spend on country buses just to reach the Facility. Some as young as Preps have to change up to 3 country buses and travel from 7.30am to reach school by 9.00am. Does this seem right??????

Even in Bendigo Central we have students who are from disadvantaged families or those who live a long way from the Facility school they are attending. Our Primary aged students have been able to access a Taxi Service over the past years, if necessary, to get them to our Facility but AGAIN our funding has been AXED. Now we have young Deaf students who are unable to access the one Facility that would offer them the best form of Education for them.

- vi) Facilities that are based on our model would be a definite advantage to the Deaf students as they have "Deaf Peers" right through their schooling and the availability of TOD and qualified Interpreters. The main funding problem we have are the student/TOD ratios that have been set by the Education Department:

1:4 Primary
1:6 Secondary
1:6 Senior Secondary

When students reach Year 10 and definitely in Years 11 and 12, students have a huge range of subjects to choose from to prepare them for their further study or employment choices. Unfortunately Deaf students are being disadvantaged again, as it is impossible for all students to be covered if they all choose different subjects. Why should they all have to pick the same subjects just so they can be covered?????? The ratio should drop when they reach these higher levels of education, as this is the most important years of their education.

vii) There needs to be more Teachers of the Deaf and qualified Interpreters being trained to alleviate the extreme shortage of these Professionals. At the moment TOD training must be undertaken in Melbourne therefore these students mostly wish to stay in the City rather than move to rural areas. There should be one or two Universities in the larger rural centres who offer TOD training and Interpreter training so attract country students and hopefully retain them for work in these areas. Here in Bendigo we have a large University that has Primary and Secondary Teacher Training but all students who wish to do the extra training to become a TOD have to move on to Melbourne for this purpose. Why not offer the training here when they have a ready made training facility which would in turn help us with our shortage of TOD???????

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To summarise, Deaf Education needs to continue to improve to enable our students to have every opportunity to realise their potential. We don't wish to have to revert back to the old ways of segregated settings because of the continual withdrawal of funding and services.

Our Facility here in Bendigo is a definite anomaly, but should be looked upon as a new and successful form of delivering Excellence in Deaf Education. We have suffered the closure of our Deaf Hostel, a severe shortage of TOD's and Interpreters and the cessation of our Taxi service, but our student numbers continue to grow because of our excellent programs and we hope to continue this growth along. Hopefully the refunding of our Taxi Service will take place and maybe if some of my concerns are met with extra funding in regard to student/staff ratios etc our coverage of senior students will improve.

Thankyou for this opportunity to have our say and trust this Inquiry will see improvements into the Education of our Deaf children.

Regards

Wendy Maher
4 Trotting Tce
Junortoun Vic 3551

Ph: 03 54493404
Mobile: 0403606473
Fax: 03 54414568

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