

## **VSDC – Services for Deaf Children**

### ***Submission : Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee. Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities***

**VSDC – Services for Deaf Children** would like to take the opportunity provided by this Senate Inquiry to submit our assessment of the current and proposed models of education for deaf and hearing-impaired children in Victoria. Our contributions on this topic have been strongly influenced by ongoing consultations with our principle stakeholders who are deaf and hearing-impaired children, young people and their families.

We have also had a recent opportunity to explore best practice models of deaf education in our region. New Zealand has recently undergone a review of the education of students with disabilities. The outcome of this review has been a fairly broad reform agenda which includes a National Policy on the Education of Students with Disabilities, a separate National Policy on the Education of Deaf and Hearing Impaired Learners and a co-ordinated, regionally responsive approach to program delivery.

VSDC has proposed a plan for the provision of educational services for deaf and hearing impaired children. This proposal is included as an appendix to this document.

For this submission, we would like to address the key concerns of families of deaf and hearing impaired children. Some of these are summarised below:

- ◆ lack of co-ordination amongst educational service providers leading to disparity of outcomes for children;
- ◆ level of financial support for children in their chosen setting;
- ◆ funding of transport to facilities and local schools;
- ◆ training/professional development of teachers in appropriate methodology;
- ◆ restriction of choice within catchment area;
- ◆ inability to attract qualified, appropriate professionals to rural and remote areas;
- ◆ access to quality specialist services including educational audiology, psychology and speech pathology;
- ◆ access to LOTE education;
- ◆ integration of deaf students into hearing schools; and
- ◆ lack of outcomes in literacy education.

In relation to the adequacy of current policies and programs for students with disabilities to meet their education needs and the respective roles of the Commonwealth and states in regard to the education of deaf and hearing impaired children, we are pleased to present the following submission.

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## **VSDC – Services for Deaf Children**

### ***Submission : Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee. Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities***

#### **i. the criteria used to define disability and to differentiate between levels of handicap**

Deaf and Hearing Impaired Children do not suit the current or proposed model for educating children with disabilities in Victoria.

It is well established internationally that deaf children pose unique linguistic and cultural challenges to educators, different from those of other groups of children, with or without disabilities. Why are the needs of deaf children unique? Firstly, unlike other children, most deaf children enter school unable to process and integrate information through auditory or verbal mechanisms, unless they are supported. Nor are all deaf children able to use verbal communication in the same way hearing children are.

Secondly, within the population of deaf children there is enormous diversity. Each individual student will differ in terms of their specific communication needs, their learning needs, their environmental access needs, their technology needs, their cultural and linguistic needs. The management of these needs in terms of direct educational programs as well as incidental learning through classroom interaction requires an extremely complex set of competencies in educators.

Thirdly, while inclusiveness may be an essential characteristic of a quality education for many families, so is the need to foster the development of a strong identity as a member of a cultural and linguistic community. The importance of schools has been critical, historically, in establishing and maintaining cultural associations for deaf people. This is no less so today, given that the great majority of deaf children (estimates average at 90%) are born to hearing parents. Schools and school communities have been the primary conduit for the transfer of language, culture and identity amongst deaf children.

VSDC strongly supports the goal of inclusive education, where that term is used to articulate the rights of deaf children to achieve the educational targets set for all students. We also believe that in order for this to happen, the Department of Education must consider the needs of deaf children outside of the framework established for children with disabilities. In reality, there is an inversely proportionate relationship between the degree of “disability” and the support needs of deaf children. VSDC is concerned about what happens when the resources to be managed and deployed are insufficient to ensure that “all students needs are met”.

Finally, in relation to definitions of deafness, we are concerned about the sometimes misconstrued relationship between type and degree of hearing loss and educational needs. The system of support is weighted heavily in favour of students with profound bilateral losses. While the needs of these students are certainly significant, they are sometimes no less significant or impactful than moderate, conductive or unilateral losses. Nevertheless, students with the latter types of hearing loss are ignored under the present structure. We would like to see a broader definition of hearing loss used when determining the support needs of hearing impaired students as well as an acknowledgement of the support needs of these students.

#### **i) the accuracy with which students’ disability related needs are being assessed**

VSDC questions the need for a one size fits all assessment instrument for children with disabilities. Deaf children meet one of the seven criteria for the Disability and Impairments program – Hearing Impairment. Within this criterion, there are six levels of funding. If a deaf child is assessed within this criterion at Level 3 or 5 or 6, this surely reflects the level of support needed to ensure all their needs are met. It is nonsensical to assess a student who presents with no other disability against the criteria of physical disability, severe language disorder, severe behaviour disorder, intellectual disability, visual impairment and autism spectrum disorder. In theory, failure to specify need against any of these other criteria does not reduce the actual support needs of the deaf student. In practice, this is exactly what happens. If a student is assessed at level 5, for instance, within the only relevant criterion, but ultimately is funded at level 3, because the assessment instrument requires assessment against

## VSDC – Services for Deaf Children

### **Submission : Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee. Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities**

inappropriate criteria, one might argue that this throws the entire methodology into doubt, not only the focus of questions. The resulting disequilibrium between the initial identification of needs and the subsequent funding outcome can be seen to be inequitable, after all, needs are identified but ultimately not met.

Moreover, we are concerned that needs assessments of students, particularly those who may be the only deaf or hearing-impaired student in their school, are being undertaken by professionals with no specific understanding of the needs of such a student. The demand on our organization for this type of advice has increased dramatically, yet we are not funded to provide this service. Where is the expertise that families and school communities can draw on? Do we really expect schools to build in expertise for every disability they may encounter? What is needed is:

- access to specialist professionals
- policy framework
- educational service guidelines
- objective needs assessment independent of resourcing constraints

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

In relation to students in rural and remote areas, we are concerned at the disparity of services and outcomes. Deaf students in these areas do not have access to the myriad of choices available to metropolitan families. Given the disbursement of deaf children across the State, it is difficult for schools in rural and remote areas to ensure the critical mass needed to create economies of scale. Without these, it is unlikely that the funds available to individual students will be sufficient to meet all their needs, regardless of whether those students are signing dependent or auditory/verbal. The decrease in numbers of students attending residential programs in Melbourne indicates that families have embraced the notion of inclusion within their local community. However, we have serious concerns about the capacity of these school communities to adequately cater for the needs of these students. The principal issue for rural and remote schools is the recruitment of appropriate, qualified personnel. The failure of DEET to maintain a co-ordinated, robust and responsive Visiting Teacher Service has also impacted negatively on educational provision to rural and remote students.

For some students, enrolment in their local school will not be an appropriate option. Often families will explore a number of alternatives, one of which may include a Melbourne based specialist school for the deaf. Families choosing this option clearly do so because they, they child and their local school community agree that their particular needs can only be met in this setting. For students from rural and remote areas, access to these specialist schools is conditional on the availability of suitable accommodation programs. The problem we face in Victoria is the reluctance of the Department of Education to consider accommodation an education imperative. This past year has seen them refuse funding for two students from rural Victoria. This raises serious questions for those families. Who must assume responsibility for accommodating students away from home in order for those students to be able to access educational programs which best meet their needs? Is it the families? Or is it the statewide educational service that can only be accessed from Melbourne and therefore, a Department of Education responsibility. Is it discriminatory to deny country students access to the only appropriate educational setting?

In recent years, demand for accommodation services in Victoria has leveled out to between 14 and 21 students. For many years, VSDC was funded to provide this service by the Commonwealth. Under the CSDA, funding responsibility transferred to the State Human Services Department, which then took a different view of their responsibilities. We agreed in principal that this type of accommodation was about access to appropriate educational services and not out of home care. Subsequent discussions saw a change of responsibility from Human Services to Education, with \$80,000 transferred to the Education to cover the costs of six places. Human Services agreed to grandfather existing students until their exit from the school system. The Department of Education has refused to provide additional

## **VSDC – Services for Deaf Children**

### ***Submission : Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee. Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities***

funding to meet the needs of new students. As a consequence, from the beginning of 2003, total grants will be just in excess of \$100,000 in a total budget of almost \$300,000. This abnegation of responsibility on the part of the State government is appalling and a sleight of hand that must be addressed by the Commonwealth.

Another example of how deaf and hearing impaired students from rural and remote areas are disadvantaged is in relation to access to LOTE (Languages Other Than English) programs. If demand for our Auslan Tuition Program is an indicator, deaf students and their families in regional and rural Victoria see quality Auslan programs as an essential part of their education. Unfortunately, the scarcity of teachers of Auslan outside metropolitan Melbourne is an issue. Not only are there no teachers, there are few appropriate teacher aides as well. In part, this is a result of the location of the deaf community in Melbourne. One of the solutions VSDC has created to meet the demand of country families is to resource individual Auslan tutors to work in an itinerant capacity. They may travel to a particular region over a number of days, seeing a number of families for intensive periods. Another possible solution to the issue of Auslan access in country areas is the use of video conferencing. A number of teaching institutions have trailed Auslan classes through video conferencing and we believe it may be worthwhile evaluating these programs to determine its suitability.

In relation to students from non-English speaking backgrounds, VSDC is concerned about the failure of DEET to adequately capture their needs. Given that deafness impacts principally on language and communication, these students should be additionally resourced to ensure access to relevant English as a Second Language instruction.

#### **iii) the effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs**

Our key concerns about early intervention relate to the following four issues.

Firstly, there is inconsistency across the state, with two government departments, DEET and Human Services, providing radically different approaches. In all other states and territories, early intervention for deaf and hearing impaired children is an Education Department responsibility. The importance of early intervention lies in the early learning opportunities for both children and their families, something that clearly falls within the scope of Education.

Secondly, most early intervention services are Melbourne based, with extremely limited outreach capabilities. Access for country families routinely consists of infrequent home/preschool visits or travel to Melbourne. This is problematic given the intensive needs of deaf and hearing impaired children and their families.

Thirdly, the competitive environment around early intervention is problematic, particularly for families who are just coming to terms with the implications of diagnosis. There is a paucity of unbiased, appropriate information for families about early intervention providers.

Finally, with energetic lobbying nation wide for the introduction of universal neo-natal hearing screening programs, we are concerned about the potential impact of these initiatives on early intervention programs. If research findings from overseas are to be believed, the implementation of UNHS is likely to present significant challenges to the way in which early intervention is delivered across the country. Yet, discussions of these impacts are negligible.

## VSDC – Services for Deaf Children

### **Submission : Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee. Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities**

#### **iv) access to and adequacy of funding and support in both the public and private sectors,**

We have expressed elsewhere our belief that level of financial support available to deaf children is inadequate to ensure all their needs are met, particularly when coupled with a philosophy that focuses on the inclusion of students in local community schools. Within both public and private sectors, there is an inconsistency in service delivery that we believe results from a complete lack of policy guidance for those implementing educational programs for deaf and hearing impaired students. The result is some excellent but exceptional programs for some students, and some alarmingly poor programs for others.

#### **v) the nature, extent and funding of programs that provide for full or partial learning opportunities with mainstream students**

As stated previously, deaf children are extremely diverse in terms of their broader educational needs. It is likely that a good solution for one child may be completely inappropriate for another child. A school may well have two deaf children enrolled, with very similar levels of financial support required but completely different support needs. The management of resourcing in its current manifestation will not meet “all the needs” of these children. Changes to the present funding structure should not take place in relation to funding levels for deaf children until there is an examination of the specific educational needs of these children and a realistic acknowledgement of the types of structures that are needed to ensure all needs are met.

In relation to the integration of deaf and hearing impaired students in mainstream schools, families have identified a number of barriers, and they include:

The issue of transportation to integrated Deaf Facilities is a pivotal concern for parents who wish to exercise their choice. While there appear to be some unique arrangements made for some students, in the main, families choosing this educational option (as opposed to a specialist school for the deaf), are ineligible for the same support in transporting their children to school.

Another important issue is the lack of homogeneity across facilities. Currently, integrated facilities do not provide consistency in approaches to the education of deaf children, nor are they able to meet the needs of students across philosophical and methodological boundaries, some of which involve stark contrasts in terms of processes and outcomes. In reality, deaf facilities provide variations of educational methodologies from auditory/verbal to bilingual but rarely all. This results directly from a lack of policy informing the practice of deaf education which stipulates as a fundamental requirement that deaf facilities provide comprehensive educational programs, encompassing all choices, and then resources them appropriately so that they are able to achieve that goal.

The current reality is that some families who make informed choices about educational settings often identify a deaf facility as the best option for their child but not necessarily the deaf facility closest to them. Those families who are able to accommodate that choice, will do so. And those who can't, will continue to be less than satisfied by choices they feel compelled to make.

In conclusion, while there are examples of both good practice and poor practice in integration, what is absent from the landscape is a comprehensive policy framework. Without the policy framework, we will continue to see ad hoc practices that only benefit a few, rather than consistent, quality approaches that will provide sound educational outcomes for the majority.

## VSDC – Services for Deaf Children

### ***Submission : Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee. Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities***

#### **vi) teacher training and professional development**

In order to be most effective, the issue of professional development needs to be looked at within the context of teacher training in general. How well do universities prepare graduates for the requirements of their jobs? How can these courses accommodate the teaching of inclusive education theory and practice in a way that is not merely superficial? Certainly, we believe that these competencies are quite distinct for the education of deaf children and cannot be generalised across the spectrum of disabilities.

It is unlikely that existing generalist teacher training courses are able to provide graduates with the comprehensive skills that are needed for them to become effective managers of inclusive education without substantial changes to courses. If this is the case, then in-service training of teachers becomes critical. However, it is absurd to consider that any amount of professional development on the part of the generalist teacher will enable them to perform the functions of specialist professionals in deaf education in addition to their normal duties. The issues that then arise are:

What professional development do generalist teachers need?

Who provides the professional development?

What are the professional development needs of specialist professionals who work with deaf students, i.e. teachers of the deaf, integration aides, interpreters, etc?

Current approaches to teacher training clearly lack the capacity to develop broad ranging competencies in teachers of the deaf. The over-representation of medicalised or deficit paradigms in the training of teachers of the deaf fails to prepare teachers for the range of environments and methodologies currently employed in the education of deaf children. Most notably, failure to comprehensively address topics such as bilingual/bicultural education, Auslan, English as a Second Language, Deaf Culture and Identity seriously impacts on the delivery of quality education. Schools who have opted for programs such as these, experience significant delays in service provision while teachers develop these skills post training. The demand for professional development in these areas is evident in the number of teachers of the deaf who have availed themselves of the opportunity to learn Auslan through the Department's LOTE Training and Retraining program. Although this is a welcome opportunity, those who work with deaf children acknowledge that it takes many years to develop fluency in Auslan. Measures such as actively supporting training institutions to increase recruitment of students with pre-existing skills in Auslan, ESL, deaf culture, etc. would also be worthwhile. Recruitment of deaf teachers of the deaf is also an important measure to ensure the development of educational programs that are culturally relevant, that reinforce deaf identity and provide a rich linguistic environment for deaf students.

The problem with this recommendation is that it does nothing to address the training and professional development needs of "paraprofessionals" who may also play an essential role in the delivery of educational programs to deaf children, namely integration aides, notetakers and interpreters.

In relation to sign language interpreters, there are currently no formal educational requirements of these paraprofessionals. Sign language interpreters are accredited through the National Authority for the Accreditation of Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) at either Interpreter or Paraprofessional level. Some interpreters who work in educational settings are Paraprofessional level interpreters. The most common pathway in this career structure for those with no relevant entry-level skills is a Certificate level language acquisition course, followed by a Diploma in Interpreting. In total, this pathway consists of approximately 2 years of full-time study.

## **VSDC – Services for Deaf Children**

### ***Submission : Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee. Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities***

In many instances, schools rely on the sign language interpreter to provide access for deaf students. This is problematic from several points of view:

1. Interpreters are often required to interpret in subject areas where they have no specific expertise.
2. Current practices in educational interpreting do not adhere to appropriate Occupational Health and Safety standards for sign language interpreters leading to problems of physical and mental overload.
3. There are insufficient interpreters available to ensure appropriate work practices are adhered to.

While many schools attempt to recruit interpreters who are NAATI accredited, the reality is that many schools are unable to do so. The current situation indicates that experienced interpreters will move out of educational interpreting for these reasons so that the majority of schools are only able to attract recently qualified, inexperienced or unqualified interpreters. Some of the reasons for this are listed below:

1. lack of role definition
2. low remuneration
3. poor working conditions
4. limited career/promotion opportunities

Again, these problems are compounded by the fact that there are no policy guidelines for schools on working with interpreters. VSDC believes the development of these would greatly benefit practitioners and the school community in general.

In relation to integration aides, there is a similar problem. As indicated previously, there is no compulsory training for integration aides, yet many aides working with deaf students are performing duties inappropriate to their position.

There appears to be inadequate definition of the role of the integration aide, which allows for two contrasting and equally undesirable outcomes.

1. Where the integration aide has some expertise in deaf education, i.e. can use Auslan or Signed English, the aide may be called on to facilitate communication, i.e. interpret, provide linguistic models for the student or other members of the classroom, or in some cases, prepare and deliver LOTE lessons to students. This situation is evident time and again where the integration aide is a deaf person who is fluent in Auslan, for example.
2. The integration aide may have some expertise in working with children with disabilities, none of whom have been deaf. This experience leads schools to believe that they can subsequently work with deaf children.

Clearly, what is needed is a closer examination of the specific needs of deaf students and the function of all professionals and paraprofessionals within those contexts. Moreover, while these issues are problematic for metropolitan schools, the challenges for rural and remote schools is even greater. Therefore, regionally responsive state plan must be an essential component of a quality system.

**VSDC – Services for Deaf Children**

**Submission : Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee.  
Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities**

**vii) the legal implications and resource demands of current Commonwealth and state and territory legislation; and**

Historically, VSDC has been one of the few non-school organisations to provide support services and advice to the education system in Victoria through the Commonwealth National Equity Program for Schools. We believe that changes to increase state autonomy have resulted in decreased consistency in service provision across state borders. For our part, it has become increasingly difficult to respond to the needs of our stakeholders. VSDC has received no indexation of our grant for the past six years, representing an effective cut of between 15 - 20%. We are expected to do the same or more with less resources.

Through this process, the States have secured the right to set their own priorities, but in the area of deaf education we believe this has been to the detriment of the service users.

The recent High Court decision to uphold the jurisdiction of the Commonwealth's Disability Discrimination legislation over the States is encouraging. While this has re-opened this avenue for families, in our view, it is not necessarily the best way to ensure that the system becomes more responsive to the needs of all deaf and hearing impaired children.

**The role of the Commonwealth and states and territories in supporting the education of students with disabilities.**

There is a clear need for the Commonwealth to drive issues of equity for deaf and hearing impaired students across the nation. Some roles may include:

- Ensuring accountability for outcomes in education
- Including deaf children in national targets in education
- Measuring performance against others States and Territories
- Promoting best practice models nationally

The onus on states and territories should be to provide a policy framework and a co-ordinated plan. We need a system based on principles and policies rather than the current one, based on resource management.

Rhetoric such as local management and decentralisation means that people without specific expertise are being asked to balance highly conflicting demands for limited resources against the expectations of families and communities, within a policy vacuum.

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**VSDC – Services for Deaf Children**  
***Submission : Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee.***  
**Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities**

Appendix: Submission to the Department of Education (Victoria)

**Plan for Educational Provision for Deaf Children in Victoria**

Given time constraints, VSDC's previous submission addressed specifically the recommendations of the Better Services, Better Outcomes Review. We did not address, in that submission, all of the key issues that have emerged in recent debates on deaf education. The following proposal recommends changes to the current system of educational provision for deaf and hearing-impaired children.

VSDC believes the system should include:

- A statewide co-ordinator of educational services for deaf and hearing-impaired children who develops and monitors implementation of the policies and provisions recommended herein.
- An advisory group comprised of parents and professionals with responsibilities for appraising the co-ordinator of most promising practices as well as quality and consistency of service provision across the state.
- A service system based on principles not limitations.
- An effective regional plan for the implementation of policy in deaf education.

Principles of Educational Service Provision for Deaf and Hearing Impaired Children

1. Deaf students have access to a quality education that provides the foundations for a successful life.
2. Deaf students have access to the support required to ensure all their needs are met.
3. Deaf students have access to an appropriate environment for the development of social and emotional wellbeing, including peers and role models.
4. The support needs of Deaf students are independently assessed and continually monitored.
5. The assessment of the support needs is conducted using an appropriate assessment instrument.
6. Parents are empowered in their decision making by quality information.
7. Professionals have the specialised knowledge and skills needed to work with deaf children.
8. All placement options offer a range of methodological choices.

1. Deaf students have access to a quality education that provides the foundations for a successful life.

Traditionally, deaf students have not been taught curricula equivalent to their hearing peers. While this appears to have been addressed politically, if not through current educational practice, it remains a fact that the expectations placed on deaf children are not the same as for hearing children. Deaf children are not included in statewide or national targets in education. Were that the case, the appalling statistics in literacy achievements of deaf students would be rightly labeled a national disgrace. Another such example relates to the inclusion of deaf students in LOTE programs. In the majority of cases, deaf students are exempt from LOTE in what can only be imagined is the mistaken belief that deaf children cannot learn other spoken languages easily or effectively. While the veracity of this belief must be questioned in light of the LOTE achievements of deaf children in European countries, it fails to account for the benefits to deaf children of an Auslan LOTE acquisition program. There are no barriers for deaf students in acquiring Auslan. Not only does Auslan instruction enrich school experiences, it also acts an important cultural bridge for contact with the deaf community.

After 100 years of the professionalisation of the role of the teacher of the deaf, too many deaf children continue to leave school educationally and vocationally disadvantaged. The reasons for this are complex and vary amongst individual students. A deaf child who enters school is no less capable of

## VSDC – Services for Deaf Children

### **Submission : Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee. Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities**

learning than any other child. This child has no barrier to learning that is not imposed by the education system he/she encounters. In an environment of complete access, this student will develop the competencies expected of every hearing child. The fact that the majority of deaf children will not develop these broad ranging competencies is an indictment of the education system and not a reflection of deaf students' innate capabilities.

Of perhaps greater importance, however, is the role of schools in enhancing the social and emotional wellbeing of deaf students under their charge. The unique patterns of transmission of linguistic and cultural heritage within the deaf community rely on the prevalence of an alternative view from that being promulgated by medical and scientific "experts" in deafness. This alternative view sees deafness as a life to be lived, not a problem to be fixed.

The issues which emerge as critical under this principle are therefore:

- Access to comprehensive curricula
- Development and implementation of an effective literacy strategy
- Access to comprehensive and effective Auslan programs
- Inclusion of deaf students in national targets of educational achievement

#### **2. Deaf students have access to the support required to ensure all their needs are met.**

The support needs of deaf children vary according to a number of factors, not all of which are easily identified in reference to degree of hearing impairment, reliance on Auslan or use of assistive hearing devices. The support needs of some children will be considerable, those of others less so. However, when those needs are deemed to be considerable, such as for the deaf child who is reliant on Auslan for access to all classroom interactions, but the system fails to meet those needs, these students are denied access to education. It must also be said that while different, the support needs of many students in auditory/verbal settings are no less considerable. The effectiveness of auditory strategies in one-to-one communication do not necessarily translate to an ability to process classroom interactions. It must be emphasised that a cochlear implant does not restore hearing to deaf children. It may be argued that in order to receive the maximum benefit from this procedure, deaf children require a great deal of specialist intervention.

The Department's own consultations in this area have brought to light the inability of generalist settings to effectively meet the needs of all children with disabilities. For some deaf children, the only environment that will effectively meet all their needs is a specialist school for deaf children. Given that there are only two statewide specialist schools in Victoria, both of which are based in Melbourne, the question of accommodation provision for individuals and families becomes crucial to ensuring access.

The critical issues are:

- Deaf students have uncompromised access to classroom teaching and learning.
- The support needs of deaf students, once identified, are comprehensively met.
- The choice of the most appropriate and least restrictive environment is facilitated by access to ancillary services such as accommodation and transport.

3. Deaf students have access to an appropriate environment for the development of social and emotional wellbeing, including peers and role models.

As alluded to earlier, the pattern of transmission of linguistic and cultural heritage amongst deaf children differs significantly from that of other linguistic and cultural minorities in this country. Deaf children are 90% more likely to have hearing than deaf parents. This means that the acquisition of language and the development of a culturally deaf identity will most likely not be through the traditional route of the family.

## **VSDC – Services for Deaf Children**

### ***Submission : Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee. Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities***

We also know that there is an important correlation between the development of a positive “deaf” identity and the social and emotional well being of deaf children. In our community, the most significant avenue for the transmission of this type of cultural knowledge has been through the friendships formed at school. VSDC has serious concerns about emerging trends of establishing facilities with very small numbers of students and indeed the enrolment of isolated deaf students in local community schools. We believe this does not allow the critical mass required to create an environment in which linguistic and cultural knowledge can flourish. It also does not allow for the positive influence of deaf role models.

The question of social isolation in deaf students may be addressed through closer collaboration between a statewide co-ordinator of educational services and a regional manager, whose role it is to develop and oversee the implementation of a regional plan. This manager may well be attached to a particular setting in which deaf students are presently educated, but is responsible for a plan that integrates and co-ordinates educational provision for all the deaf students in his/her region.

There is a vital role for Auslan LOTE and Deaf Studies programs in strengthening socio-cultural identity.

The critical issues are:

- The Department reviews current policy on the creation of facilities and implements regional plans for the delivery of educational services to deaf children.
- Deaf children have access to age appropriate (deaf) peers.
- Deaf children have access to role models.
- Deaf students have access to comprehensive Auslan and Deaf Studies programs.

4. The support needs of Deaf students are independently assessed and continually monitored.

VSDC believes that effective program placement requires an independent, objective assessment of student needs. The purpose of this assessment is to recommend appropriate placement options for individual students in relation to their support needs. Professionals who are not representatives of the various programs operating in this state should conduct this assessment in active consultation with families. Assessment of students should be conducted within the context of the placement options, i.e. students need to be assessed within the classroom setting.

It goes without saying that all students’ needs change as they move through their schooling. For many deaf students, the inability of the education system to identify these changes and modify program or placement characteristics at the appropriate time, may result in serious disadvantage to those students. In any given year, VSDC may be asked to assess as many as 40 school aged children. Of the 40, approximately five are school leavers. It is not unusual to find that all five students have failed to develop sufficient skills during their school years to enable them to continue to live independently and pursue their potential through study or work. These students have no additional impediment to learning other than the fact they are unable to hear. There is a disability acquired through contact with an indifferent school system. One of the factors leading to this result, we believe, is an inappropriate monitoring of placement options, particularly for those isolated deaf students in their local community school.

The critical issues here are:

- The Department contracts a statewide entity that is outcomes focused and driven by empowerment values, to create an interface between families and the education system.
- Placement options are monitored on a regular basis.

5. The assessment of the support needs is conducted using an appropriate assessment instrument.

## VSDC – Services for Deaf Children

### **Submission : Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee. Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities**

VSDC does not believe that the Educational Needs Questionnaire, in its current form, is an effective instrument for identifying students' needs nor the funding required to meet those needs. We believe it is important to develop an instrument that is able to capture the real needs of deaf students, against relevant and informative criteria.

The critical issue is:

- The Department funds a project to recommend a comprehensive assessment instrument, measured against international standards.

6. Families are empowered in their decision making by quality information.

Families must be considered partners in the decision making process. Having the input and support of the family in placement and program choices is invaluable, but only if the family has been empowered in their decision making by quality information. Our ongoing consultations with families highlight a particular concern time and again. That is, the impact of biased information on decision making and on the long-term satisfaction of families with their decisions.

VSDC has grave concerns about the ability of educational service providers to move beyond their own prejudices about methodologies to provide quality information to families. Experience indicates that many families are incapable of the extensive research that is currently needed to understand the various options and thus make a truly "informed" decision. This situation is exacerbated by the increasing volume amongst pseudo-educational professionals advising for and against individual programs or methodologies.

The critical issues are:

- Families have access to comprehensive, unbiased information.
- The Department funds a referral service for families where they can access impartial advice on the educational needs of their children.

7. Professionals have the specialised knowledge and skills needed to work with deaf children.

The delivery of quality education for deaf children is, of course, dependent on the specialised knowledge and skills of the professionals working with them. At present, there is a tremendous imbalance in the training of professionals, be they teachers of the deaf or speech pathologists, towards a pathological view of deafness and against the acceptance of the deaf child as a whole child. The current monopoly that exists in teacher training, for example, is undesirable, in as much as it fails to prepare teachers for the wide range of contexts in which they will ultimately need to work.

Of significance, however, is the fact that an increasing majority of deaf children in country areas will have access to teachers of the deaf for a fraction of the time they are in school. And if the training of teachers of the deaf is deemed to be ineffectual, what can be said about the training of other professionals and paraprofessionals who will work with these children for most of the time. The issues around personnel in deaf education are at crisis point. The system has become so *ad hoc* and inconsistent that more and more families are now considering drastic measures to ensure their children have access to quality programs. If there is to be a review of deaf education, the issue of personnel is a critical one.

In order to eliminate the obstacles to learning, classroom interaction and importantly, language acquisition, professionals who work with deaf children must be proficient in the language or preferred communication mode of their students. Research has shown that the majority of teachers of the deaf in Victoria, while proficient in English, are not proficient in Auslan. VSDC is also aware that a significant number of teachers of the deaf are engaged in the process of learning Auslan. However,

## VSDC – Services for Deaf Children

### **Submission : Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee. Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities**

proficiency in Auslan cannot be rapidly developed and therefore the recruitment of individuals with pre-existing skills in Auslan, both deaf and hearing, should be a priority.

The critical issues are:

- The support needs of deaf children in relation to specialist professional intervention is reviewed.
- Recommendations regarding appropriate competencies of such professionals are developed for the purpose of negotiating better outcomes with teacher training institutions.
- Professionals working with deaf students have access to comprehensive professional development programs.
- Professionals working with deaf students are proficient in their language or preferred communication mode.

#### **8. All placement options offer a range of methodological choices.**

VSDC believes that the present situation in which educational settings favour one methodology over another may constitute a serious breach of the rights of deaf children, whose needs would be more appropriately met under another methodology or combination thereof. Educational placements should offer the flexibility of program options to ensure they are able to meet all the needs of the students enrolled. This would do much to alleviate the untenable situation of some families who must choose an educational placement further away from home when there is a placement closer to home, which they are currently unable to access because it does not meet the needs of their child.

We feel the *ad hoc* arrangements that are currently in place regarding the establishment of new facilities have more to do with response to pressure from individual families than strategic developments in deaf education. We also question whether these families fully understand the implications of the decisions they have made, in particular, the long-term impact on the student of relative isolation from peers. Finally, given the findings of the Meier report, we question the ability of schools to provide an inclusive environment, in which quality educational outcomes are not compromised, for three or four deaf children.

The critical issue is:

- Deaf children have access to comprehensive and flexible educational programs.