



*PO Box 143
HENLEY BEACH
SA 5022*

The Secretary,
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations & Education Reference Committees
Suite S1.61 Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
eet.sen@aph.gov.au

Friday, 26 April 2002

Dear Madam or Sir,

Please find attached the PHISA submission to the Inquiry Into The Education Of Students With Disabilities.

This submission gives some evidence of our concerns but we would also like to request the opportunity to express our concerns in person.

Yours sincerely,

Naomi Higgs
President
Parents of the Hearing Impaired SA Inc

- i) The criteria used to define disability and to differentiate between levels of handicap

Criteria used for this kind of categorisation is divisive to all families of children with disabilities in trying to prove that your child is more handicapped than someone else's. The categorisation is also about putting children in pre-determined "boxes" not looking at exactly what the child needs to access the school curriculum.

Hearing loss is variable both in terms of types and levels of loss and in terms of the effects of that loss on the child's education.

The definition should be about the needs of the student for equity of access, not what box they fit in to.

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

The area of hearing impairment has been the subject of continued restructuring within education here in South Australia. This restructure has seen the removal of many senior positions within hearing impairment and as such a loss of specialist expertise. The lack of specialist skills has led to assessments and subsequent related needs being made by individuals who lack extensive knowledge in the required area. Hence the less visual disabilities are often discriminated against in terms of level of support because the wider effects of the disability are under estimated by generalist managers and supervisors.

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

Parents and families from low socio-economic and non-English speaking and Indigenous backgrounds often lack the knowledge and skills to access the system. The education system in general is not that parent friendly and is certainly not particularly accessible to parents from these groups.

Indigenous children suffer the highest levels of undiagnosed and untreated conductive hearing losses and as such their education suffers.

Students from rural and remote areas do not have appropriate access to audiologists, speech pathologists, psychologists and teachers of the deaf as the metropolitan counterparts. Parents in remote areas have to post hearing aids to the city areas for repair. In the turn around time, the student remains without hearing aids for amplification.

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

In South Australia there is a significant difference in the level of funding for students with profound hearing loss between those in the government and non-government sector. Our own investigations show that in some instances students in the government sector are receiving of the order of \$18,000 whilst the student of the same need in the non-government sector receives of the order of \$6,000. The child's level of hearing loss and effect of this loss is the same irrespective of the school placement and the funding and level of support provided should reflect this. Negotiations about per capita funding between the sectors will always be there but "disability funding" should be provided based on the level of disability not the sector in which the student is placed.

In South Australia children in the non-government sector are also disadvantaged by the Ministerial Advisory Committee funding only have a census once per year. If a student is not enrolled in the non-government school at the time of the census and then subsequently enrolls then there is no funding provided to meet that child's needs until the following years census.

This means that service agencies either operate at a loss or do not the service the child until the following year, which is entirely unacceptable for parents and families.

In the public sector children with a hearing loss are often the “invisible disabilities” in that they look the same as everyone else. This means that often their needs are underestimated and the support provided to them is inadequate. Research shows us that children with a hearing loss who are provided with appropriate support can match their hearing peers in educational outcomes.

vii) teacher training and professional development

Teachers are facing increased pressure in a more inclusive school environment where they may have multiple students with significant additional needs. Yet the teacher training courses have very little special needs education information in the course work. Teachers are not provided with sufficient information about disabilities, behaviour management issues etc.

Again teachers often overlook the effects of hearing loss as it is not such a visual and obvious disability. Working with students with a hearing loss may mean modifying delivery modes of education and teacher training should assist teachers in the flexibility of their classroom presentation.

Whilst professional development may be offered to these teachers, they need release time to enable them to attend these courses and similarly release time to access other specialists in the area for co-planning etc of what is best for the students needs.

viii) the legal implications and resource demands of current Commonwealth and state and territory legislation

The DDA is very clear that students with disabilities are legally entitled to equal access to the curriculum as their non-disabled peers. This is not the case for many deaf students and the definition of what constituted equal access has yet to be tested. Physical access (eg wheel chair access) is an obvious access issue but what are other access issues for deaf students? If poor acoustics prevent a student from accessing information in the classroom is this an access issue under the DDA? Given that education is about life skills, ensuring that a child can pass the tests is not providing equal access and if challenged may have dire consequences for state and Commonwealth governments. Equal access must also be about social inclusion and the provision of skills for life.

1(b) what the proper role of the Commonwealth and states and territories should be in supporting students with disabilities

If we are truly looking to meet the needs of students with disabilities then funding for these students and a specified level of educational support should come from a Commonwealth level. In this case states may add to this pre-determined level but can not subtract from it. With the USA model of the Bill of Rights and the IDEA, it is known as the Chevy and Cadillac model. The IDEA at a Federal level ensures all children have a Chevy. At a state level this Chevy could be upgraded to a Cadillac under state legislation but it can not be replaced by a bicycle at the state level as this would breach Federal Legislation.