

# Submission to the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee

## Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities

### Introduction

The staff and parents of students in the Deaf Integration Unit at Methodist Ladies' College (MLC) would like to submit the following submission to the *Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities*.

MLC is a school of the Uniting Church for girls in Melbourne, Victoria. The school has an enrolment of over 2000 students, including 20 deaf and hearing-impaired students who are integrated in classes from Prep to Year 12.

Our group strongly supports the need for equitable access to high quality education for all deaf and hearing-impaired students in Victoria. The MLC Deaf Integration Program has demonstrated success with students over the past 16 years and believes we offer a model for good practice.

We are continuing consultation with our parent group and will submit further information to the Inquiry as appropriate.

Our submission addresses the following Terms of Reference:

- outline MLC's good practice approach to the education of deaf and hearing impaired students ( 1(a) vi )
- highlight areas for improving Government policies that impact on the education of students in independent settings ( 1(a) v)
- make some general comments that highlight the specific educational challenges for deaf children, and that will support for new program directions for deaf children. (1(a) iii & vii)

### Terms of Reference

*1(a) vi: the nature extent and funding of programs that provide for full or partial learning opportunities with mainstream students*

Deafness has a profound effect on language development and therefore communication. Students in a mainstream setting must have access to the language of the class, either spoken or signed.

At MLC we have in place well developed educational strategies for deaf students. These strategies recognise that for the deaf student language and communication are essential for access to learning. We provide students with opportunities for intensive language development, meaningful involvement in their learning, and well structured literacy programs.

The model at MLC allows students who communicate using speech and those using sign language to be educated in the same setting. Our program ensures that students are provided with teachers of the deaf, sign language interpreters, note takers, speech therapy programs, and audiological support. Hearing students gain an understanding of the need to value diversity in the community, and develop ways of communicating with hearing impaired and deaf students.

Deaf and hearing-impaired students at MLC are not discriminated against on the basis of their communication methodology. We believe this enables more effective learning and has positive benefits not only for their educational outcomes but also for their social and emotional well being.

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

The funding provided for deaf and hearing-impaired students in the private sector is significantly lower than in the public sector. This means that for some parents access to the MLC program is not possible.

At MLC Commonwealth funding provides limited resources for each student, up to \$3000 a year. State funding, which provides access to speech pathology services for students has declined over the past few years. This level of funding is totally inadequate for a student with a profound hearing loss who requires full time interpreting, the support of a teacher of the deaf and regular speech therapy.

The implications of this funding arrangement means that parents who elect to send their child to an independent school are significantly disadvantaged, and the school therefore carries the cost of the program for the student. We believe that deaf and hearing-impaired students in the private or public system should be given the same amount of financial support.

To adequately provide funding for the deaf child, formulas need to cover communication and interpreting costs, access to specialist teachers of the deaf, speech therapy, audiological services, and where appropriate funding for infrastructure that will assist the students to maximize their sound reception. If this situation is not remedied there will not be any real inclusion of the deaf in the education process in Australia. Funding for programs is an issue in

both public and private sector programs for deaf and hearing-impaired children.

**a) *iii the particular needs of rural students and vii teacher training and professional development***

We urge the Commonwealth and State Governments in partnership with educators and parents to develop good practice and education models for deaf and hearing impaired students which address their special literacy needs, opportunities for social development, and inclusion in the learning process.

We are concerned about the special needs of rural deaf and hearing impaired children and their access to adequate specialist teacher services, speech therapy and audiology services, transport and accommodation options. We are also concerned about the additional special needs of children from Non English Speaking backgrounds.

***vii) teacher training and professional development***

There are too few teachers of the deaf, and we believe that regional communities are particularly disadvantaged. The special literacy and numeracy learning strategies for deaf children need to be more adequately addressed in teacher training programs

In the next 5 to 10 years there will be a critical shortage of teachers of the deaf in Victoria. Within the current group of teachers many will reach retirement age during this time. HECS fees preclude many teachers from applying for postgraduate courses. Special arrangements must be introduced to attract young primary and secondary teachers to study for these specialist positions.

**Conclusion**

We are pleased to be able to have the opportunity for input into this inquiry and would be available to provide additional information if needed. We would like to invite members of the senate committee to MLC for further consultation if time allows.

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