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To the members of the Senate Inquiry Into the Education of Students with Disabilities.

I am writing on behalf of the parents of the children who attend the Bendigo Deaf Facility. We have a model of a deaf facility that is unique in Victoria. It reflects the progressive nature of education in this region and has demonstrated excellent outcomes for the children attending the facility. It is the only deaf facility in rural Victoria that covers both primary and secondary schooling to year 12. Our deaf facility extends across three campuses. One of the reasons it has succeeded is due to the excellent co-operation between the schools, the school councils and the community.

At Kennington Primary School our deaf students commence at prep and progress through to grade six. They then move to Golden Square Secondary College for education in years seven to ten before graduating to Bendigo Senior Secondary College for their VCE. Nowhere else in the state can parents of deaf children know that their child has P-12 access. The Deaf Facility support across the three campuses comprises of Teachers of the Deaf, Interpreters and Auslan Instructors.

At Kennington Primary School there is an outstanding Auslan-English Bilingual program in which some of the Key Learning Areas are taught in Auslan. This program provides both our deaf and hearing students an understanding of the curriculum through Auslan. Auslan is also taught by deaf adults as a LOTE subject at Kennington Primary School and at Golden Square Secondary College. External assessment of the Auslan program is currently being undertaken by La Trobe University. It is an ongoing assessment looking at the program both qualitatively and quantitatively. It is a rigorous report with excellent results so far.

Our deaf students are involved in all aspects of the primary school and the two secondary colleges. With the introduction of Auslan to the facility, they are achieving at a higher level academically and socially than before. They are now performing at CSF levels appropriate to their grade levels. This has not occurred before. The deaf students at Bendigo Senior Secondary College have access to the widest range of VCE subjects and to the excellent On-Line Technology which the college offers. The outcomes of our deaf students are proof that this system gives our deaf children the best opportunities to successfully gain employment and contribute to society.

We do have concerns though. This inquiry into the education of children with disabilities obviously means that changes are going to occur. While change can have positive and forward moving outcomes, we are deeply concerned that there will be funding cuts. Deafness is a unique disability. When fully supported deaf children function as well as any hearing child. Without the support they become extreme underachievers. We want the current ratios of students to teacher of the deaf and students to interpreters to remain as is. We have seen the changes that have happened

to Visiting Teacher Service for deaf students and are greatly concerned that this will happen to our facility. With the present system of funding money is set aside for professional development days, CRT days and resource funding.

Deaf children cannot be isolated. They need other deaf children for their common language and support. For many of the children at our facility, Kennington Primary School, Golden Square Secondary College and Bendigo Senior Secondary College are not the closest local schools. Many of them live on farms and other towns. We had a hostel where children could board during the week while they attended the Bendigo Deaf Facility, however due to lack of ongoing committed funding was closed. Families fought year after year for the hostel to remain open, but found it too much in the end. Now families have to make personal sacrifices for their children to access the best education for their deaf child. These are some instances where families have had to make enormous changes:

- A family works a farm three hours away from Bendigo. When the hostel closed they bought a second house in Bendigo. During the week dad works the farm while the rest of the family live in Bendigo.
- A family works a farm one and a half hours from Bendigo. When the hostel closed they bought a unit in Bendigo. During the week their son lives at the unit and is looked after by one of the deaf Auslan instructors.
- A girl travels on three buses to get to school in Bendigo. It takes one and a half hours to get to school. It also takes one and a half hours to travel home. That's three hours a day she spends on buses.
- A boy travels on two buses to get to school. It takes an hour each way. That's two hours a day spent on buses.

There are other children who live out of Bendigo whose parents drive them to school at the deaf facility. All of these children have homework they are required to do. With the travelling time they are exhausted even before the reach their homes. To have to face homework on top of that is a mammoth task. How much easier it would have been for each of these families if the hostel had been kept open.

The Bendigo Deaf Facility had access to a local taxi service. As with the hostel the funding for this service has been withdrawn. Families who used the taxi have children who attend the Bendigo Deaf Facility but again have to travel because it is not their local school. While it is nowhere near the amount of travelling time the families mentioned above experience, it still makes life difficult when they have to drive their deaf child some distance to the facility.

I thank you for the opportunity to be able to have input into the Inquiry Into the Education of Students With Disabilities. It is very important for parents to feel they can have a voice in such matters.

Yours sincerely,

Lorraine Morton, Secretary, Parent Support Group, Bendigo Deaf Facility.