

A submission to

The Senate Employment, Workplace Relations
and Education References Committee

***Inquiry into the Education of Students with
Disabilities***

On behalf of the School Staff and Board of
**St Gabriel's School for Hearing Impaired
Children,**

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St Gabriel's School for Hearing Impaired Children has provided educational services for children with impaired hearing and their families since 1922. The school comprises two Early Intervention centres, one at Castle Hill in Sydney and one in South Brisbane and a school at Castle Hill that caters for children from Kindergarten to Year 10.

The school program fosters the development of the students' listening skills and aims for the development of spoken language that is age appropriate so that children may enter regular classes and continue their education with their hearing peers.

The staff and the Board of St Gabriel's school have collaborated to prepare this submission to the 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

The degree of hearing impairment is measured in decibels of hearing loss and may also be qualitatively described as mild (21-45dB HL), moderate (46-60dB HL) severe (76-90dB HL) or profound (91+dB HL). While such measures provide an accurate indication of the functioning of the auditory system and are essential to the fitting of amplification they do not adequately indicate the difficulties experienced by a child whose deafness has occurred within the first five years of life. For such children, the disability is their hearing impairment; the handicap is the delay in learning spoken language that may result without appropriate early intervention. The ability to communicate freely with family, peers and other significant adults is fundamental to a child's development.

ii) The accuracy with which students' disability related needs are being assessed

It is customary for funding authorities to use only the degree of hearing loss as a measure of a child's need for educational support or early intervention programs. Some children may have chronic conditions such as otitis media that result in mild hearing loss over a long period of time. These children often display speech difficulties, language delay and experience difficulty in learning to read. Regrettably, the degree of hearing loss, and its fluctuating nature often means that these children are precluded from additional government funding or classroom support.

Other factors that impact upon any child's need may include:

- *The age of onset of hearing impairment.* Where hearing loss occurs before the child has developed a first spoken language, the impact on both speech development and language development is more significant than for a child whose hearing loss occurs after the development of spoken language.
- *The age of diagnosis, fitting of amplification and early intervention.* Neonatal testing offers the opportunity to provide appropriate amplification and early intervention with significantly better results for the child. Where children are diagnosed later, or where intervention is not commenced promptly, the outlook for normal speech and language development of less positive. The average age of diagnosis is currently 2 years of age. Therefore children often begin intervention with a 2 year delay.
- *The language spoken at home.* Where families regularly speak a language other than English at home, the hearing impaired child may be confronted with the task of learning two languages. Given the disadvantage the hearing impaired child already experiences, this causes an even greater disadvantage leading to severe handicap in the early years.
- *The presence of additional disabilities:* Multiple disabilities are often present in children with impaired hearing. Assessing the needs of this group requires a transdisciplinary team approach. Unfortunately, the lack of coordination among service providers often leaves this coordination responsibility to the parents already overextended by the disabilities of their child. Well-funded support for such teams who could also support the social and emotional needs of the family is a pressing need often identified by our families. One parent recently commented that when her child's surgery had been completed, his life saved and hearing aids were fitted, she desperately needed emotional support to cope with the impact of her son's disability. The kindness of various professionals was insufficient. She needed a team leader who took overall responsibility for coordinating services to really appreciate the difficulties the family was confronting and to act as an advocate for them in this difficult time.

ii) The particular needs of students with disabilities from low socio-economic, non-English speaking and indigenous backgrounds and from rural and remote areas

Early intervention programs for children with hearing impairment place demands on parents to be actively involved in the development of their child's speech and language. At St Gabriel's, our families visit the Centre each week with their children to work with the therapist. They then return home with videotapes of the session with a week's intensive activities for the following week. Parents who lack well-developed skills in English are less able to participate in the program with consequent disadvantage for their children. Similarly, families of low socio-economic status often need to place their children into long day care placements while both parents work; this is not an ideal option for a child with significant language learning delay both because of the lack of 1:1 communication and the poor listening conditions in such a busy centre. The parents are indeed forced to relinquish part of their role as primary care givers and language teachers because of their financial circumstances.

A number of the families in our Early Intervention Centre come from rural areas. For them, travel to the centre is expensive. Whereas financial support is available for rural families to attend for medical treatment, educational services are not similarly funded. Our families visit our centres once or twice a term for two or three days. We assist by providing accommodation at the centre at no cost to our families but travel costs and the cost of time lost from work are major deterrents to the families. When children reach school age, there is limited support for the hearing impaired child. Irrespective of the child's readiness, integration into a regular class with some support from a specialist teacher, where available, is often the only option.

iii) Effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs

Infants with significant hearing loss require intensive early intervention as soon as they are diagnosed. The pressure on parents to be involved in these programs often means that one parent needs to be a full-time carer at least until the child reaches school age.

The St Gabriel's programs achieve their excellent results through an intensive 1:1 program that depends on educating the parent to be the primary language teacher of the child.

In 2002, St Gabriel's Early Intervention programs in Castle Hill and South Brisbane each have 20 families in their services. Total

Commonwealth funding for these programs \$66,348 ; that is \$1658.70 per child per annum. The programs are not eligible for any additional funding from the State Government. The programs are staffed by the equivalent of 3.2 therapists. Government funding meets the salary needs of just over one therapist. The remaining funds are obtained from fundraising activities donations and private bequests. See further details in (iv) below.

While this is an expensive program to operate, we believe that it produces the best possible outcomes for our students, 90% of whom have acquired age-appropriate language skills and are able to be fully integrated into regular schools upon reaching school entry age and to be educated alongside their hearing peers. The educational advantages of this are measurable from the academic outcomes of these students, their ability to participate in tertiary education and to obtain employment that ensures that they can take their places as contributing members of the adult community. We believe that the long-term cost effectiveness of this program to the community, as opposed to continued education in a special school, amounts to at least \$150,000 per child over their educational career from kindergarten to grade 10.

iv) Access to adequacy of funding and support in both the public and private sectors

Of major concern to private providers of special educational services is the differential funding rate that applies to non-government schools. St. Gabriel's School is one of only two schools in NSW that offer specialised auditory-oral education to students with hearing impairment. In 2002, we received an SES per capita rate of \$3765 or 70% of the Primary Australian Government Schools Recurrent Cost. However, the AGSRC is based on the *mean cost* of educating a child in a Government School. It does not reflect the true cost of educating a student with a disability in a Government School where teacher: pupil ratios are less than for regular classes and where additional equipment and specialist teachers and specialised facilities must be provided. Consequently, the per capita grant represents far less than 70% of today's costs of educating a child with a disability in a Government School.

As is evident from the description of our Early Intervention Program, those students who require a full-time special school placement in the primary years are the most disabled and disadvantaged of our students. At school entry age, they were not ready to cope with full-time inclusion in a regular school. Many have additional disabilities or

other disadvantages. These children require a teacher : pupil ratio of no more than 1:6.

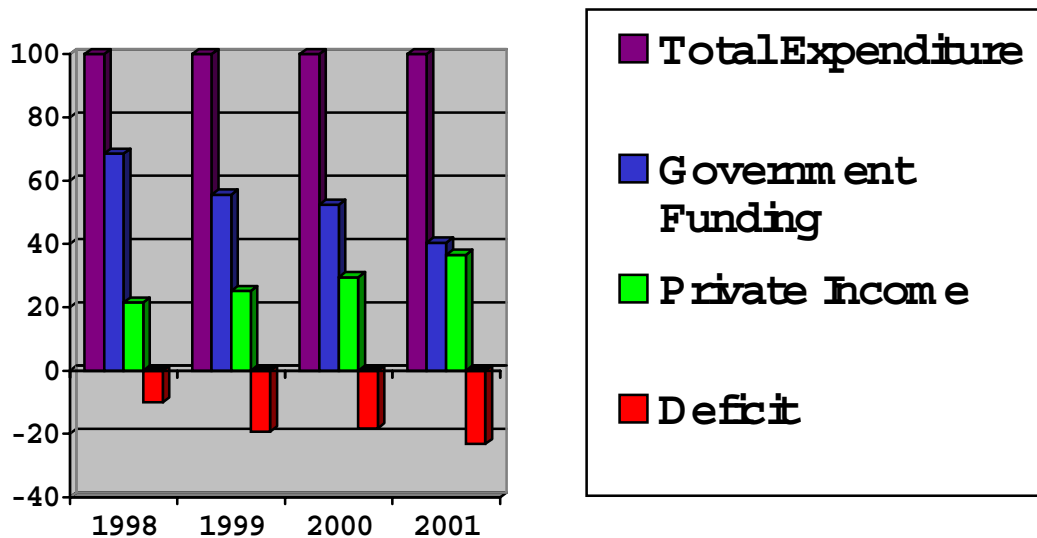


FIGURE 2:
St•Gabriel' s School for Hearing Impaired Children
Percentage of funds received from various sources
School years ending 31/1/1998- 31/1/2001 •

Note: Deficit is funded from reserves accrued from private bequests built up over the past 77 years

The impact of the present inadequate government funding upon the viability of a special school is evident in the graph in Figure 2. At present the deficit is funded from reserves carried forward from private bequests built up over previous years. At the present rate of depletion of funds obtained from private bequests, St Gabriel's will cease to be viable within ten years. It should be noted that 86% of expenditure is for staff salaries.

Over the last four years, income from Government grants has remained static, while private income largely from fundraising has doubled in the last two years. Raising school fees to compensate for the deficit is not an option given the socio-economic status of most of our families; nor would we ever refuse admission to a student on the grounds of inability to pay fees. A number of families are already unable to pay the full fee of \$915 per year.

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

St Gabriel's School operates a partial integration program into neighbourhood schools for our students who are progressing toward full inclusion in the regular school. To support these students and the teachers in the receiving schools, we employ an Itinerant Teacher for three days per week. While this is valuable, the support is often inadequate during the transition period when teachers need professional support to meet the needs of the hearing impaired child. We find ourselves dependent on the goodwill of receiving schools and the willingness of teachers to "go the extra mile" to learn about hearing impairment.

Occasionally, our attempts at inclusion are unsuccessful. One eight year old student recently applied to attend the public school near her home for one half day per week. Her sister is already enrolled at the school and we anticipated no difficulties. However, the application was refused on the grounds that there was no funding from the NSW Department of Education for this student's inclusion and we were unable to guarantee that a teacher from St Gabriel's would attend with her each week. The Principal of the public school did not even meet the student before making this decision. We then enrolled the student in the Catholic primary school in this Diocese. They welcomed her, but we then discovered that she was ineligible for taxi transport to her home after school because she was in a regular school and "only had a hearing loss". While avenues of appeal are being negotiated, St Gabriel's school is paying a teachers' aide to drive the student home from the regular school. Moving toward the desirable objective of full inclusion in the regular school is made more difficult by circumstances such as these.

The difficulties we experience are not significantly different from those referred to by David McRae in the Integration / Inclusion Feasibility Study (NSW Government: October 1996). Little has changed in five years.

vi) Teacher training and professional development

Programs for training teachers of students with impaired hearing existed in most Australian States until 1995. As hearing impairment is a disability affecting a relatively small percentage of the population, there is a need for a small number of highly-trained teachers to meet their needs. The social imperative to meet this need has been

subsumed by the financial constraints on University budgets in recent years. Consequently a number of some courses have been eliminated and the quality of other programs has been diluted. The consequence of this is that schools such as St Gabriel's find it extremely difficult to recruit appropriately trained teachers. Some staff come with qualifications in Special Education and learn the specialised skills of working with hearing impaired students as part of the on-going professional development program within the school. Others have experience with ESL students or qualifications in teaching reading and require vast amounts of inservice training.

Where appropriate programs of study are available through the Universities, the cost of meeting full tuition fees is a disincentive to teachers many of whom have young families and therefore limited financial means. Were postgraduate courses in Special Education to be included as HECS programs, more teachers may be attracted to the area.

We discover when we attempt to include our students into regular classes that the teachers' understanding of special needs is limited. Despite the mandatory special education subject in University courses in NSW, they have limited appreciation of the language, speech, listening and reading needs of our students. There is rarely adequate time to fully prepare these teachers before our students enter their classes. The provision of inservice programs by Government and Catholic education authorities varies in availability and quality.

vii) Legal implications and resource demands of current Commonwealth and State and Territory legislation

St Gabriel's School supports the inclusion of children with impaired hearing in regular classes when they are able to benefit from such inclusion. A major factor in this is the provision of adequate support and resources. Under the present Anti-Discrimination legislation, parents can insist that their child with a disability be enrolled in a neighbourhood school. However, if the level of support for that child is insufficient, then educationally the child may survive but not thrive. That is, inadequacy of funding to meet the aspirations of the Act bring about discrimination against the students it was intended to assist.

In 2002, schools are subject to a range of complex legislative provisions – Child protection legislation, privacy provisions, occupational health and safety regulations, the Anti-Discrimination

Act. While the provisions of all of these pieces of legislation have their merits, compliance with them is, for a small, independent school extraordinarily expensive. Observing these legal requirements consumes resources to the detriment of our students.

What should be the role of the Commonwealth and States and territories should be in supporting the education of students with disabilities?

We believe that families whose children have a disability are entitled to the same choice in selecting an educational placement for their children as are families whose children do not have a disability. Many of our families choose to send their children to a Catholic School. Some prefer that their children attend a Special School because of the limited language development of their children or because of their additional disabilities or disadvantages.

The families who access our Early Intervention programs elect to participate in a program that teaches their children to listen and to use spoken language. They make the choice in full knowledge of the effort that is required of them as parents to support their children through the difficult language learning years.

Educating children with a disability will always be more expensive in monetary and human resource terms than educating a child without a disability. Governments can best give expression to their commitment to equal educational opportunity for children with disabilities by acknowledging the role of public and private educational providers in meeting the students' needs and by appropriately funding these service providers. Adequate teacher preparation in undergraduate programs is a prerequisite for successful inclusion of students with disabilities in regular schools.

If our students are to take their rightful place in society, resources must be provided for early and appropriate diagnosis of disabilities, for family support and early intervention programs, for appropriate transition programs into regular educational settings and for appropriate educational placements for those students for whom a special school setting is considered to be the preferred option.

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