

**Senate Employment, Workplace Relations & Education
References Committee**

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

On behalf of:



Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children

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1. Summary

In this submission, the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children has listed briefly a number of issues and principles that are deemed worthy of consideration as a basis for ensuring that “policies and programs for students with (sensory) disabilities are adequate to meet their education needs” [Terms of Reference 1(a)]. The Institute would welcome the opportunity to give further evidence about these issues, and/or to address other issues relating to the education of children with sensory disabilities that may be raised with or by the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee.

Further, this submission addresses two specific issues in response to particular terms of reference and makes two recommendations to the Inquiry.

In summary, these issues and recommendations are as follows:

Issue One: The adequacy of funding support made available by the two tiers of government to allow students with disabilities (particularly sensory disabilities) to opt for integrated education in a non-government school.

Recommendation One: That the Inquiry Report makes recommendations concerning the assurance of adequate levels of government funding to provide support for the integration of students with disabilities, regardless of whether those students attend government or non-government schools.

Issue Two: The adequacy and accessibility of professional preparation programs for teachers of children with sensory disabilities.

Recommendation Two: That the Inquiry Report makes recommendations concerning (a) the assurance of adequate levels of government funding to provide for the ongoing provision of highly specialised postgraduate teacher training for teachers of children with sensory disabilities, and (b) the need for government to fund mechanisms for ensuring that teachers are encouraged to undertake such training (e.g., through funded scholarships or the availability of HECS-liaible or HECS-exempt places in postgraduate training programs).

2. Brief Background

The Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children is Australia's largest non-government provider of special education services for children with disabilities. It is also the oldest provider of educational services to children with disabilities in Australia, having continually provided such services since 1860.

The Institute's primary purpose is to provide high quality educational services to children who have significant hearing and/or vision impairment, including children who have additional disabilities. To this end, it operates three independent special schools, five preschools, an extensive home-based and remotely delivered early-intervention program, extensive support services for children with sensory disabilities who are integrated into regular schools, and a wide range of ancillary and support services including an assessment and advisory support service for children with vision impairments, and alternate format production facilities.

In affiliation with the University of Newcastle, the Institute conducts Renwick College, a centre for research and professional development in the education of children with impaired hearing or vision.

3. Response to the Terms of Reference

This response is in two parts. Section 3.1 provides a broad response to the terms of reference by listing some important issues in the education of children with sensory disabilities. Section 3.2 addresses two specific issues in response to particular terms of reference.

3.1 Broad Response—Issues in the Education of Children with Sensory Disabilities

There is a wide range of issues that which require effective response as a basis for ensuring that “policies and programs for students with (sensory) disabilities are adequate to meet their education needs” [Terms of Reference 1(a)].

For the purposes of this submission, we have listed briefly some of the issues and principles that should be considered in developing and delivering services for children with sensory disabilities. The Institute would welcome the opportunity to give evidence about these issues, and/or to address other issues relating to the education of children with sensory disabilities that may be raised with or by the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee.

3.1.1 Issues in the Provision of Educational Services for Deaf and Hearing Impaired Children

The population of children who require specialist educational services because of their hearing impairment is extremely diverse. Deaf and hearing-impaired children display a wide range of needs and preferences in regard to primary language and mode of communication. This diversity and the need for comprehensive services to serve all members of such a diverse group raises, among others, the following issues:

Early Intervention and Early Childhood Education

- Family-centred early intervention for deaf or hearing-impaired children and their families has proven to be an important component in the children's successful and age-appropriate development.
- The establishment of universal newborn hearing screening (and associated educational intervention services), as a national standard, will more effectively enable successful and age-appropriate developmental outcomes for deaf and hearing-impaired children. There is currently no such uniform provision. **There is a critical need to ensure that such provision does indeed become a national standard.**
- Early educational services, as for all educational services for deaf and hearing impaired children, should provide for a range of options for families in regard to communication and language (spoken, signed, etc.) as well as type and location of program (integrated, inclusive separate special preschool/school, etc).
- Parents should routinely receive open and unbiased information about the full range of educational program options for their deaf or hearing-impaired children before being required to make a commitment to any one communication approach, program type, or location. There should be continuing capacity for decisions to be reviewed and programs to be amended according to individual needs and requirements.

Communication and Language

- The development of age-appropriate and effective communication and language skills is fundamental to a deaf or hearing-impaired child's academic, social, cognitive, and linguistic development, as well as their mental and physical well being.
- Deaf and hearing-impaired children should have their individual communication and language needs fully assessed as infants and throughout their educational experience as a basis for decision making about appropriate interventions and support for their linguistic development.
- Early intervention and ongoing educational programs should provide for a range of alternative communication and language options.
- Deaf and hearing-impaired children should, as part of their programmed educational experiences, have access to a sufficient number of age, developmental, and communication/language peers. Individual integration

is the absence of communication/language peers *may* be counterproductive in terms of educational and social-emotional outcomes.

- Deaf and hearing-impaired children should, as part of their programmed educational experience, be served by education professionals who are highly proficient in their chosen language and communication mode.
- Teacher training and subsequent teacher employment processes should be structured to ensure that teachers have the required high level of proficiency in (a) the language and mode of communication that is required for their deployment in specialised educational environments for deaf students, and (b) the particular pedagogies associated with the effective development of language via that language and mode of communication.
- Where interpreters are used as part of a response to the language and communication needs of students who are deaf, they should be certified in accordance with national standards for interpreters (i.e., NAATI).

Program Location and Service Options

It is important that decisions relating to placement/program type should be based on the unique communication, language, social, and developmental needs of individual students. There can be no “one size fits all” approach to such issues. The unique linguistic and social issues associated with deafness *may* dictate that a special school or “congregated” program (i.e., where a “critical mass” of linguistic peers are integrated into a regular school program) are more appropriate than integrated placement.

The appropriateness of any type of placement—integrated or separate school—should be judged only in terms of the individual needs of particular children. There can be no place for value to be ascribed to one type of program on any basis other than individual children’s requirements. The aims of all placement options should be consistent and entirely uncontroversial—that is, for the child to achieve academic, personal and social outcomes commensurate with their own potential, regardless of the language or communication mode that is being used.

- It is important that educational authorities (State and/or Federal) ensure that there is a comprehensive continuum of program options available for deaf and hearing-impaired students (i.e., separate schools, “congregated” integrated settings, or fully inclusive environments).
- The availability of a comprehensive range of program options requires the assurance of normalised curriculum standards, appropriate financial allocations, and the oversight of delivery systems to ensure that all the necessary supports are available to make all of the options viable for deaf and hearing-impaired students.
- Not all options need to be made available within all sectors of the education system (i.e. government and non-government). However, there is a need for government to accept responsibility for ensuring that the provisions that are in place are comprehensive and adequately resourced.

- Consideration *must* be given to how a comprehensive range of options can be made available/accessible to students and families who are geographically removed from major centres of population.
- The curriculum for students who are deaf and hearing-impaired, regardless of placement, should be fundamentally the same as that for students without disabilities but with such varied instructional approaches and supports as may be required.

Technology

Various forms of technology are relevant to the needs of deaf and hearing-impaired students. When used appropriately, such technology can greatly enhance the learning capabilities of students with impaired hearing.

As new technologies are incorporated into general education, it is imperative that these be made completely accessible to children and adult learners who are deaf or hearing impaired. Federal laws such as the Disability Discrimination Act may need to be enhanced to ensure such access.

- Children who will use their residual hearing should be fitted as early as possible with appropriate technology. To this end there is a need to ensure that there is no diminution of the Federal Government's commitment to the provision of free and universally available access to hearing services and hearing equipment under the terms of the Hearing Services Program. Extension of this program to devices other than hearing aids (particularly cochlear implants) should be a priority issue for governments.
- Parents who may wish to pursue the option of cochlear implantation should be able to receive clear and unbiased information about this option in the context of their chosen programs for early intervention and/or early audiological management.
- All videos used in all school settings should be captioned (either open or closed) for the hearing impaired.
- All instructional software should be accessible to children who are deaf or hearing impaired (i.e., ensuring that there are visual analogues of all auditory information).

Personnel

- See specific comments and recommendations under 4.2.

3.1.2 Issues in the Provision of Educational Services for Blind and Vision Impaired Children:

The population of children who require specialist educational services because of their vision impairment is also extremely diverse. Blind and vision-impaired children display a wide range of difficulties and varying adaptations to vision loss. For some children, blindness or vision impairment will be their only disability. However, for a large proportion, vision impairment will be only one of several identified disabilities (intellectual, physical, or emotional) that will affect their learning.

The challenge for educational services for blind and vision-impaired children, including those with additional disabilities, is to teach skills that sighted children typically acquire through vision. Blind and vision-impaired students will use a variety of methods to learn to read, write, and acquire academic and nonacademic skills. For reading, some students use Braille exclusively while others will rely on large print or regular print with low vision aids. Some may rely on computer-generated speech, while others have sufficient functional vision to use regular print. This diversity must be recognised and catered for by any educational service delivery system.

Specifically, this diversity and the need for comprehensive services for this group raises, among others, the following issues:

Early Intervention and Early Childhood Education

- Children and their families must be referred to an appropriate education program as soon as possible after diagnosis of a significant impairment of vision. Referral mechanisms and community awareness programs should ensure that this occurs.
- Family-centred early intervention for blind and vision-impaired children and their families has proven to be an important component in the children's age-appropriate development.

Communication and Language

- Access to educational services, whether they be specialised or wholly integrated, must include an assurance that instructional materials will be available to students in the appropriate media (Braille, large print, electronic format, etc.) and at the same time as their sighted peers.
- There needs to be an assured supply of educational and recreational reading materials for students of all ages. To this end, appropriate funding and support for Braille and large print production agencies needs to be ensured.

Personnel

- It is critical to the success of educational programs for blind and vision-impaired students that there be adequate provision of skilled and competent specialist staff across a range of categories: service managers, visiting and consulting teachers, orientation and mobility instructors, and technical support personnel.
- It is also critical that there be a critical mass of personnel who have adequate training in the production of Braille across all necessary codes (e.g., literary, mathematical, music).
- See also specific comments and recommendations under 4.2.

Adaptive Technology

- Systems of funding adaptive aids and equipment for blind and vision-impaired students that link the equipment to schools rather than students themselves are problematic for students who move between schools and, in particular, between service sectors. It is critical that consideration be given to a system of personalized funding for acquisition of at least some of the technological equipment that blind and vision impaired students require to access the curriculum.

3.2 Specific Responses to Selected Terms of Reference

3.2.1 Adequacy of Support for Integrated Education in the Non-government Sector

The issue considered here addresses terms of reference “1a (v)” and “1a (vi)”.

At issue is the adequacy of funding support made available by the two tiers of government to allow students with disabilities (particularly sensory disabilities) to opt for integrated education in a non-government school.

The majority of children with sensory disabilities are educated in regular educational environments—typically with significant (often very high) levels of additional special educational support.

It is evident from available data that proportional representation of students with disabilities across the various sectors of the educational system (government and non-government) is not occurring. Children with disabilities of all types are significantly under-represented in non-government schools (particularly in independent schools).

The current federal government has significantly reinforced its commitment to the availability of parental choice between the government and non-government sectors for schooling. However, in spite of the legal and educational imperatives (including recent case law concerning disability discrimination), there remains a question about whether choice of a non-government school is really a viable and supported option for children with disabilities.

Appropriately, according to community standards, the cost of “choosing” a non-government school education is met in part by the parents of each student, and in part by the Australian tax-paying community. The contribution by Governments (State and Commonwealth) to the education of a student in a non-government school is, on average, approximately half of that contributed for each student in a government school.

It is clear that this financial commitment to giving parents a right of choice between schools and sectors does not apply equally well in the case of students with disabilities. Although there is a government commitment to

choice, there is only a limited strategy for giving practical effect to that commitment where children with disabilities are concerned.

The Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act (1992) obliges non-government schools to provide access and support. However, the Act places no obligation upon the Commonwealth to assist in meeting the cost of such provision. The cost of the special support required by a student with a disability is expected to be borne largely by the school community. In the case of a child with a sensory disability, the cost of such support is many times greater than the cost of educating a child without disabilities.

There is an existing mechanism for funding both government and non-government schools in regard to the special educational needs of students with disabilities across both government and non-government schools (i.e., the Strategic Assistance for Improving Student Outcomes Program—SAISO). The level of funding available under this program (in both its recurrent and capital components) falls considerably short of the amounts needed to support a student with significant disabilities—particularly a student with a sensory disability.

The per-capita grant available to an independent school that enrolls a student with a sensory disability under the SAISO program is \$589 (this may be supplemented by additional integration support funds that could amount to, perhaps, \$1,000 - \$2,000 per annum).

Taking the specific case of a student who is blind; it is apparent that the support necessary to provide equitable curriculum access greatly exceeds these levels of available funding. Indeed, it *may* be very considerable indeed. The costs could include:

Itinerant teacher support (including motor vehicle costs)	=	\$ 30,000 (plus)
Braille production	=	\$ 30,000 (plus)
TOTAL	=	\$ 60,000 (plus)

For a deaf student costs could include:

Itinerant teacher support (including motor vehicle costs)	=	\$ 21,000 (plus)
Speech pathology, etc	=	\$ 4,000 (plus)
TOTAL	=	\$ 25,000 (plus)

In the government education system, such specialist support, which is always considered necessary to support a student with a hearing or vision disability, is provided to students in the integrated setting via a range of direct funding mechanisms which go way beyond the provisions that can be made available to an independent school under the SAISO program.

The cost of providing such support is borne by the state (i.e., by the community as a whole through taxation). It is acknowledged that that there is an important and rightful role and responsibility for any school to provide the

support structures necessary to support a student with a disability within their school program. However, it would appear an inequitable imposition upon a single independent school to have to bear the full cost of such provisions as a basis for providing equitable access to its programs by a student with a disability when it is considered that government has determined that it will subsidise students without disabilities to a level of approximately 50% of those operational costs—and often much more.

Further, and perhaps more importantly, it seems unfair and out of keeping with the “spirit” of the DDA for governments to administer a funding mechanism that is sufficiently inadequate to routinely allow any school—government or non-government—to be able to mount a successful defence of “unjustifiable hardship” when students with complex and costly support needs seek to enrol.

The latter issue seems particularly unfair and inequitable when government is actively promoting access to non-government schools through subsidy (funding) mechanisms that benefit non-disabled students and encourage their participation in this sector. If it is accepted that Australian schoolchildren disabilities ought to have the same opportunity and choice in schooling as other Australian school students, then a number of changes might be constructive. A necessary starting point in such a process would appear to be a review of funding arrangements under the terms of the DDA.

The most desirable system would be one that met the actual costs of additional support for students with disabilities on an equitable basis in both government and non-government schools. A strong social policy argument could be mounted to suggest that this should be 100% of the actual costs in both cases. At very least, the proportion of the actual costs met in the case of non-government schools should be no less than the proportion of the cost of a non-disabled student’s education which is currently met by government.

Recommendation:

That the Inquiry Report makes recommendations concerning the assurance of adequate levels of government funding to provide support for the integration of students with disabilities, regardless of whether those students attend government or non-government schools.

3.2.2 Adequacy of Teacher Training and Professional Development Opportunities

The issue considered here addresses term of reference “1a (vii).

At issue is the adequacy and accessibility of professional preparation programs for teachers of children with sensory disabilities.

The education of children with sensory disabilities requires a range of specialist professional skills and knowledge that go significantly beyond that

required of either teachers in regular educational environments or those in other areas of special education. Requisite specialist skills and knowledge for teachers of children with sensory disabilities include, among others, the following items.

For teachers of deaf or hearing-impaired children:

- High levels of facility with at least one of a wide range of possible educational methodologies which vary according to the mode of communication and language of instruction (spoken or signed) that is used with deaf or hearing-impaired children;
- Detailed knowledge and appreciation of cultural, historical, emotional, social, legal, and educational issues in deafness and hearing impairment;
- Highly effective communication skills (including sign language skills to a high level where appropriate, for teachers working with children who use that mode of communication);
- Comprehensive understanding of expressive and receptive language development and language specific pedagogies for supporting acquisition of either (or both) spoken and signed language;
- Detailed knowledge of audiological interventions including the effective operation and utilisation of hearing aids and other assistive listening devices;
- Detailed knowledge of acoustic phonetics and speech perception as a basis for teaching speech and listening skills associated with oral language acquisition;
- Knowledge of appropriate assessment, diagnosis and evaluation methods and instruments for use with deaf and hearing-impaired children;
- Direct practical experience with deaf or hearing-impaired students in a range of educational settings;
- Understanding of appropriate educational programming, classroom/behavioral management and curriculum development for this population.

For teachers of blind or vision-impaired children:

- Detailed knowledge of vision assessment strategies and associated reporting formats and terminology;
- Functional knowledge of optical interventions including the effective operation and utilisation of a range of low vision aids and devices;
- Functional knowledge of a wide range of technologies for providing access to print-based materials for blind and vision impaired students;
- Effective skills in the production of Braille;
- Working knowledge of orientation and mobility instruction strategies and techniques;
- Knowledge of appropriate assessment, diagnosis and evaluation methods and instruments;
- Understanding of appropriate educational programming, classroom/behavioral management and curriculum development for this population.

- Direct practical experience with blind/ or vision-impaired students, including those with multiple disabilities, in a range of educational settings;

Programs to provide this level of professional preparation are necessarily highly specialised and demanding of a high level of resourcing for effective delivery. However, both hearing impairment and vision impairment are low-incidence conditions and the number of teachers who require such professional training is correspondingly low.

By the late 1980s, a number of university programs that had previously provided teacher training and research in this field were experiencing difficulty in sustaining viable levels of student enrolment. Changing priorities for course management and delivery in universities exacerbated this difficulty. Minimum enrolments in both undergraduate and postgraduate programs have risen steadily since that time.

By the early 1990s, some programs for training for teachers of children with sensory disabilities had ceased to operate. Other programs were operating with low staffing levels that precluded the comprehensive treatment of the necessary specialist knowledge and skills, and seriously affected the quality of the available training.

The number of specific university special education programs in the area of sensory disability fell from seven in 1987 to just three in 1997. A response in some other post-graduate special education programs was to offer limited numbers of coursework units in sensory disability within the context of a general special education degree program. National and international experience, however, clearly indicates that the specialist skills required to operate effectively as a teacher of the deaf or teacher of students with vision impairments cannot be adequately covered in the context of a generic special education program.

Effective professional training in this area should continue to be, at a minimum, a one-year program of dedicated full-time equivalent study. However, even then, there will be a need for a program of ongoing in-service education at a postgraduate level to train teachers effectively.

As already noted, appropriately specialised professional training for teachers in these fields is extremely resource intensive with appropriately low-level demand. In order to sustain this provision and to ensure that such quality programming is made available and accessible nationally, there is a need to ensure adequate government support for training initiatives such as the one undertaken by joint venture between the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children and the University of Newcastle. This cooperation has produced Renwick College, a centre for professional training and research in the education of children with sensory disabilities.

It was in the context of this diminishing provision of professional training and research initiatives that the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children and the

University of Newcastle resolved to create Renwick College as a centre for professional training and research. Since 1994, the College has produced over 100 graduate teachers of the deaf and teachers of students with vision impairments. This program has partially reversed the alarming trend of diminished training opportunity and research provision in this highly specialised area. However, this has been achieved only through a mechanism that depends upon non-government funding and infrastructure support and in the face of increasing difficulty in attracting students into a full-fee paying postgraduate education environment (i.e., such as is now the norm for postgraduate education more broadly).

The need for government support to subsidise the provision of highly specialised and high quality training options in this area is paramount. Reliance on generic training in special education or training for teachers of children with other disabling conditions cannot be considered as a substitute for such requisite specialised training.

Recommendation:

That the Inquiry Report makes recommendations concerning (a) the assurance of adequate levels of government funding to provide for the ongoing provision of highly specialised teacher training for teachers of children with sensory disabilities, and (b) the need for government to fund mechanisms for ensuring that teachers are encouraged to undertake such training (e.g., through funded scholarships or the availability of HECS-liable or HECS-exempt places in postgraduate training programs).