

31 May, 2002

The Secretary,
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations &
Education References Committee
Suite S1.61, Parliament House
CANBERRA, ACT 2600

Dear Sir

The Royal Society for the Blind of SA Inc. (RSB), is the primary provider of services to people who are blind or vision impaired in South Australia. The RSB currently provides services to over 9,000 South Australians of all ages who are blind or vision impaired. A copy of the RSB's most recent Annual Report is attached for your information.

The RSB believes very strongly that access to education for our clients is paramount to their future independence, quality of life and ability to competitively participate in the workforce.

In submitting this paper the RSB is aware of the general structure of the education system within South Australia, including the Special Education Resource Unit in the Department of Education, Training & Employment and the invaluable specialised services provided by Townsend School and the Visiting Teacher Service.

However, through the development and delivery of it's many services and it's liaison with other bodies, including those within the educational setting, the RSB has found that the needs of students who are blind or vision impaired are not being fully met.

Accordingly, please find enclosed our submission to the Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities. In order to be concise, the format of the RSB's submission exactly mirrors the published terms of reference, however, the RSB can elaborate and provide further substantiation if required.

If you have any queries regarding the above, please do not hesitate to contact me on 8223 6222.

Yours sincerely

ANDREW DALY

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

RSB SUBMISSION DATED 2 MAY 2002

SENATE EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION REFERENCES COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Terms of Reference

For the purpose of this submission, the RSB's comments relate to it's client base, namely people who are, or are likely to become legally blind. The definition of legal blindness is as per The Social Security Act, an extract of which is included as Attachment 1.

The RSB's comments relate to primary, secondary and tertiary education and extend to participation in extra curricular activities.

- (1) Inquire into the education of students with disabilities, including learning disabilities, throughout all levels and sectors of education, with particular reference to:
 - (a) whether current policies and programs for students with disabilities are adequate to meet their education needs, including, but not limited to:
 - (i) the criteria used to define disability and to differentiate between levels of handicap;

Within South Australia, the RSB believes that the existing policies and assessments are adequate to identify a child with a severe vision impairment. However, the classification of "Print Disability" is too broad to identify specific needs or formulate the creation of early intervention strategies.

The mixing of dyslexia with blindness is inappropriate as the blindness issue is not a reading problem, but rather an access issue that has far reaching effects over a child's development. For instance a sighted child gains a substantial amount of information to assist in their development through the medium of sight. A child who is blind or vision impaired is restricted from gaining this knowledge and hence reliant on receiving specialist instructions.

The RSB does not believe that an arbitrary level of the assessed severity of a disability can be the sole definer of a person's needs. Clearly this will vary according to their aspirations, level of rehabilitation, together with a host of other

factors. Therefore, any assessment must focus on the individual rather than solely on their disability.

A further issue that continues to arise across all elements of Government, is the need for a person with a disability to demean themselves or exaggerate their disability in order to gain the required amount of support or receive a higher priority of access to support services. It is the RSB's belief that any system developed, needs criteria to identify and to assist all **eligible** people in an equitable manner.

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

A student with a severe vision impairment is normally detected through the primary health services. It is only in rare circumstances that a student will not be detected and it is our experience that this will normally be in instances where the vision loss is not the primary disability.

In order to then create a strategy to ensure the full development of the student's potential, it is necessary to involve a range of specialists. This entails educators, students and families being aware of and how to access these services. These services include information on the functional effects of vision loss, the prognosis for the vision loss and access to specialist skills, such as Orientation and Mobility, Adaptive Technology, assessment and training or peer support and the development of Longer Term Strategies. Currently there are significant gaps in this process.

The above is further exacerbated by:

- A lack of specialist teachers trained in blindness and vision impairment.
- The Department of Education in South Australia's restrictive policies in using external specialists.
- A 'one solution fits all' mentality, based on "Print Disability". (This not only ignores the needs of the individual, but also as noted above, detracts from the focus on blindness or vision impairment.)
- The recurring practice of the cheapest solution being adopted, rather than the most appropriate. (The true demand for the optimum solution has never been fully assessed as the majority of students have been traditionally grateful for whatever is available.)

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

The following are the major barriers that exist and preclude student's who are blind or have a severe vision impairment from optimising their educational opportunities:

1. *The cost of and access to specialised adaptive equipment for instance: CCTV (magnifier) - \$3,500. Screen reader/screen magnification software for computers - \$1,500. Refreshable braille panel - \$9,000. Access to this specialist equipment is required both in the home and at the educational institution.*

In order to overcome this lack of assistance to access specialist adaptive equipment, the RSB has introduced, using it's own resources, an Equipment Subsidy Scheme and a Braille Grant Scheme, details of which are included as Attachment 2.

2. *The lack of trained specialist teachers*
3. *Access to materials in a student's preferred format in a timely manner.*
4. *Consideration being given in the design and layout of the educational facility to assist independent access.*
5. *Lack of commitment to training for instance, with regard to the number of braille or other specialist skills for teachers that may be required in the future.*

All of the above are exacerbated for the above groups as a result of location, incidence, culture or language barriers.

- (iv) the effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs;

Early intervention is usually defined as services for 0-5 year olds. While the importance of services to this age group is acknowledged, the RSB has chosen to define the term more broadly to cover all age groups involved in the education system.

Early intervention is an essential component of any program, this will include the correct assessment, service planning and the collaboration of all relevant specialist service providers. A successful early intervention strategy will create independence and as a result reduce longer term support costs, be they educational or other.

The current system in South Australia imposes a number of unnecessary barriers which result in breaks in the service continuum. For instance, many students when they leave the school system do so without counselling in career options and eventually approach a specialist service provider only when they reach crisis point. This example also illustrates the costs of addressing only the educational issue in isolation to the creation of an overall service plan.

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

The RSB has noted above (1.a.iii) what it believes are the major barriers for a student who is blind or has a severe vision impairment in equitably accessing education.

In all of the following areas, the current levels of funding available are manifestly inadequate to support students who are blind or vision impaired. For the sake of conciseness I have summarised these as:

- (a) Level of Support available from specialist teachers or support staff. This extends to not only the quantum of support services available, but also the skill base. For instance the specific knowledge of the functional impact of a severe vision impairment and it's relationship to the support needs of a student.

This is a particular concern for the students in private schools and those that have embraced the Partnership 21 model of local management.

- (b) Availability of Educational Materials in the students preferred format, this extends not only to the timely provision of resource materials and lecture notes at the same time as other students, but also in their format of choice and not the cheapest or most convenient format for the educational institution.

As part of this, there is a need to review the legislative framework around Copyright and it's relationship to transcription services.

- (vi) the nature, extent and funding of programs that provide for full or partial learning opportunities with mainstream students;

Any system which mirrors the community in which a person will live and participate is preferable to institutionalism. Integration into mainstream schools is clearly the optimum approach. However, without access to specialist equipment and materials in preferred formats a student will remain isolated.

There is a need also to establish strong partnerships with specialist service providers, irrespective of the source of their funding stream into creating an overall rehabilitation strategy to ensure success.

- (vii) teacher training and professional development;

It is unreasonable to expect a teacher to have all the specialist skills necessary to cater for all disabilities. Therefore it is essential that a reasonable level of expertise is maintained within the specialist areas such as vision impairment and blindness.

Within South Australia, we believe that as a result of the relatively small number of specialist teachers and the large number of students that they are required to support, the majority of teachers are not being encouraged to participate in additional training to update their skills to cater for students with specific disabilities.

- (viii) the legal implications and resource demands of current Commonwealth and State and territory legislation;

In the absence of further information as to what is required, the RSB is unable to comment on this. However, we believe that the Commonwealth and State Government's approach to education needs to be consistent.

The RSB believes that the Commonwealth Government does have a responsibility to ensure a minimum standard of education for all students, irrespective of their disability, location or communication method.

- (b) what the proper role of the Commonwealth and States and Territories should be in supporting the education of students with disabilities.

The RSB believes that rather than define roles, the first priority is to identify the need and then develop strategies to meet the needs of students.

Between the Commonwealth and the State Governments, adequate funding and understanding needs to be established so that no student with a disability is deprived of an education due to their socio-economic or geographical conditions.

Attachment 1

Definition of Legal Blindness as per the Social Security Act 1991:

- (a) visual acuity on the Snellen Scale after correction by suitable lenses is less than 6/60 in both eyes; or
- (b) field of vision is constricted to 10 degrees or less of arc around central fixation in the better eye, irrespective of corrected visual acuity (equivalent to 1/100 white test object); or
- (c) a combination of visual defects results in the same degree of vision impairment as that occurring in (a) or (b) above.

Attachment 2

RSB Equipment Assistance Schemes

The two schemes introduced by the RSB some eighteen months ago are as follows:

(i) The RSB Equipment Subsidy Scheme

This scheme enables persons of all ages who are blind or vision impaired and who would otherwise not be able to afford essential adaptive technology equipment that costs in excess of \$200 per item to make application for a subsidy. The maximum subsidy available is \$1,000. The number of persons able to be assisted is dependent upon the number of applications and availability of funds. The RSB has budgeted on an ongoing basis, \$10,000 per annum for this scheme. The scheme is also means tested to ensure that only those in genuine need are assisted.

Eligible equipment includes talking products (eg: glucometers and personal organisers), computer adaptive software (eg: speech and magnification), closed circuit televisions and low vision magnification and lighting.

(ii) The RSB Braille Grant Scheme

This scheme was introduced to foster and encourage the use of Braille.

There is a general concern within the blindness community over the non-use of Braille by persons who would benefit from Braille training and the misguided belief that people should be able to replace computers with adaptive software for Braille. Given the importance of access to Braille, the RSB has not means tested this scheme.

The scheme was originally designed to assist individuals to purchase equipment costing in excess of \$200 per item, with a maximum grant of \$1,500 for Braille Equipment. To this end it is achieving its purpose, however, as the manual Braille is now costing up to \$1,800, the RSB has continued to meet the full cost of this essential equipment.

Other Braille equipment assisted with includes the Mountbatten (electronic and computerised) Braille and portable Braille notetakers. The latter includes items that are either Braille only or a combination of Braille and qwerty.

(iii) In the educational setting

Within the educational setting, there is a responsibility by the educational institution for the provision of specialised equipment to assist those students with a disability (including blindness or a vision impairment) to enable them to acquire information and knowledge and develop in a manner consistent with their sighted peers.

However, since the RSB introduced the two schemes, experience has led the RSB to conclude that:

- Essential equipment is not being provided to all students who are blind or vision impaired; and
- That where it is, it is often only being provided for limited periods or after some delay.