

James Bond J.P.C.B.M  
41 Patricia Street  
Killarney Vale NSW 2261

Margaret Blood  
The Secretary  
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations  
and Education Reference Committee  
Parliament Houes  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Ms Blood

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

Attached please find a submission on behalf of children with  
Dyslexia.

I would be happy to provide any oral evidence to the inquiry if  
required.

Yours sincerely

James Bond JP CBM

## EMPOWERING PEOPLE WITH DYSLEXIA, THROUGH EDUCATION TO EMPLOYMENT

Education is vital for the future of each of us and no child or adult should be disadvantaged because of his or her inability to comprehend information in any of its various forms. Much time is given to dealing with children who have a physical or emotional disability. What about children with Dyslexia?

I would first like to introduce you to my past and why I am so passionate about this issue.

I was born in 1959 in Gosford, New South Wales. From 3rd class I first recognised that I was somehow different from the other children, who harassed me for reasons I didn't understand. Teachers were also impatient with me, marked me as a dummy and sat me at the back of the class, ignoring me. My parents tried to assist me by hiring extra tuition, but they did not have the knowledge or skills to help me beyond the most rudimentary learning. I had a speech impediment, which was not corrected until 1969 by Professor Delbridge of Macquarie University, who was also the first to recognise my Dyslexia.

In addition to my attendance at Epping Boys High School, I was also enrolled in the Macquarie University School of English in 1970 where for the next two to three years they attempted to teach me how to read write and use numbers. This did advance my education to a basic level, but not a competitive level compared to my peers at school. This was despite various tests and the opinion of professionals that I was above average intelligence. In 1973, at the ripe age of 14 years and 9 months, I received the school's "Citizenship Award" and completed school - with a letter to my father from the Principal stating that they **could not teach me anything further given my condition**, which they could not address, and that I should do better leaving school and seeking manual employment. They had no hope of giving me academic skills, and had instead concentrated on giving me labouring skills assuming that this was my only option for the future.

My inability to read and write had a catastrophic effect on my employment prospects. I have applied for hundreds of jobs. Because I could not get jobs requiring literacy, like many thousands of people who cannot read and write I took on labouring jobs.

Eventually I obtained work with the State Rail Authority where I did various labouring jobs - I had failed the Trainee Engineman Test (because I could not read) so instead I became a loco cleaner! I became an Acting Plumber by way of on-the-job training (because I could not take part in TAFE courses). Then in 1982 I injured my back at work and my employment was terminated. This left me with two disabilities - Dyslexia and a back condition. For someone who could only rely on labouring work, this effectively shut me out of the workforce and condemned my family and I to poverty.

I used to hide the fact that I could not read. But after my injury, I needed help. More and more I "came out" admitting my Dyslexia, which I had previously hidden through embarrassment. Now I am unable to afford to do this any longer. Commonwealth Rehabilitation Services (CRS) became involved. They assessed me and suggested that I tried for Security Work. The CRS and CES financially assisted me with training for this. However, my applications were unsuccessful with State and Federal Government agencies.

In 1994 I settled a long legal dispute with the NSW Government concerning employment discrimination in a public sector job that I had applied for in 1989. This received some publicity in local papers and Parliament. With wider public knowledge of my condition I immediately found rejection and alienation from people I had considered friends and neighbours. From then on our social life stopped. My family was snubbed and ceased attending social functions at schools and so on. My children suffered humiliation from mates at school who had heard about me from their parents. The legal battle was combative and stressful to my family and me and though it came down in my favour, the settlement included a non-publicity clause that effectively stopped me speaking about my case. This further increased my alienation.

My solicitor recommended psychological help, particularly after the protracted legal dispute and associated alienation. After 12 months of intense psychological help, they recommended that I do a TAFE course in Small Business Enterprise. I completed this, with the assistance of a scribe, achieving a credit level certificate, proving that I was not stupid and could achieve academically at Tertiary Level.

My alienation turned around and I realised that I should become an active lobbyist for my rights and the **rights of the 1 in 7 people with Dyslexia and the 1 in 5 with Learning Disabilities**. My life since then has been incredibly busy fighting ignorance and obstinacy, and the tendency of institutions to be confrontational and litigious rather than cooperative and pragmatic when confronted by citizens claiming their right to participate in society. I should point out that when I describe myself as a "lobbyist", I mean an unpaid lobbyist!

## **OPTIONS FOR PEOPLE WITH DYSLEXIA AND OTHER LEARNING DISABILITIES**

Dyslexia and associated "Learning problems" are contentious issues today in Education and Employment. The NSW Department of Education carefully refers to "Learning Difficulties" rather than "Disabilities", presumably in order to exclude these conditions from special funding. In the US, they more confidently refer to Learning Disabilities, and spend a lot of money and academic energy trying to find technological remedies and teaching methods.

To follow is a description about a commercially available product. I am not endorsing this as the only way to go I am using it as an example of how it has positively affected my life and improved my ability to access information.

Some time in 1988 I was showing my children the State Library of New South Wales, and almost accidentally I overheard a voice miraculously coming from a machine they had there called the 'Kurzweil Reading Edge', reading out the text of a book that it had scanned. I was dumbstruck. In all my years of struggle, nobody had told me that such technology existed. I wept to think how this technology could have helped me in my education and employment and how different my life might have been. Since that day I have lobbied Federal, State and Local Governments, Rights Groups, Employers, Libraries, Universities, Colleges and Schools to have this kind of technology installed to assist people with literacy, learning or a vision disability, including Dyslexia. It has been a long struggle, with many successes and failures, but in that time technology has improved remarkably and the only excuse is political and institutional apathy. **The means are there.**

The current Kurzweil technology is called Kurzweil 3000. It is a computer program that scans printed material onto the computer screen. This is an exact colour image of the original, which can include diagrams and photographs as well as text. The image can be magnified and spoken out loud by the computer. As the computer speaks, a coloured highlighter tracks the spoken word, which can be magnified in a separate window. This combination of speech and visual image is highly effective for people with reading disabilities. The colour of the text can be altered to meet personal requirements, as well as the reading voice and rate of speaking. Dictionary definitions can be obtained when required as well as pronunciation.

This program can be used to read the Internet providing a proven benefit to people with Dyslexia and learning disabilities. It could also be beneficial to people from migrant communities whose first language isn't English. Studies have been conducted in the United States that people using these programs show significant improvement in reading speed and comprehension. When this technology has been demonstrated to Special Education Teachers, they have all been convinced of its effectiveness. Their problem has been access to funds.

The NSW Department of Education allocates funding on a per head basis of \$1800 per annum to assist with meeting the special needs associated with educating a disabled child. The problem is, it is up to the Department to acknowledge the child's disability. This money is pooled and administered to the schools on a proportional basis, but the money is used at the school's discretion. This does not necessarily translate to direct spending on an individual child. For example, I was told at a meeting at Woy Woy High School that they had a budget of \$500 for all remedial tools including books and software for 40 special needs students. This highlights the problem of mysterious budgeting but also the definitions – that the Department of Education uses. For example Dyslexia is referred to as a "difficulty" rather than a "disability", and this extends to all "Learning Difficulties". In addition, The Department of Education advises that it cannot recommend, review or prescribe technology that it is up to individual schools to find out about and decide themselves. This delegating by the

Department goes against the general principal of economies of scale. Unfortunately, I don't have all the time in the world to personally visit every school to evangelise this technology, which seems to be the only way left open by the Department's attitude.

It does not appear that the NSW Education Department has established a clear policy position on dyslexia or a framework for delivering practical and effective assistance to dylsexic children, most of whom will not complete their education, and many of whom will continue to swell our prison and juvenile justice systems, which are comprised mainly of people with reading and learning difficulties, as pointed out by the Hon. Patricia Forsythe MLC (Legislative Council 16h November 2000).

The NSW Education Department has not clearly explained how dyslexic children fit into the framework of special education support. The sticking points appear to be disagreement about the nature and diagnosis of dyslexia. I think the way out of this impasse is to look at outcomes rather than endless debates over the meaning of dyslexia; programs like the Kurzweil 3000 software will not help average readers to read better, only those with a reading difficulty with disability; why not simply test children suspected of having learning or reading difficulties with a series of reading tests with and without this equipment, and if they read significantly better, they should be given special teacher support and be given access to a program like Kurzweil 3000 at school.

On another track, the effectiveness of standing up for my rights has been demonstrated by legal rulings in my favour. For example, the installation of Kurzweil 3000 at my local Library at Wyong Shire was only after legal dispute with the Council. I had tried everything short of legal action before this, two years of talking with committees, before I was compelled to use the sledgehammer of the law. The matter was settled by way of conciliation through the Human Rights Commission. The conciliation included the purchase of Kurzweil 3000 by the Library and a ruling that the technology shown to local schools at a special demonstration with media publicity. This led to it being seen by Dr Michael Slattery, Principal of the Mater Dei Catholic College, Tuggerah, who immediately saw its application in remedial literacy. He raised funds for it and successfully established it at the school. Incidentally, despite the confrontational start, Kurzweil 3000 is now considered a valuable resource at Wyong Shire Library.

On 17 September 1998, The Honourable Brian Vaughan (Chairperson Standing Committee Law and Justice) raised the issue of Dyslexia in State Parliament of New South Wales and recommended the Kurzweil 3000 system be adopted. He said:

"The use by Mater Dei College of this computer technology illustrates what all State schools and community libraries should possess to ensure that a comprehensive service and adequate education is provided to those who suffer, for example, a visual impairment, not only dyslexia.

Bearing in mind that the Premier announced in a media literacy strategy, it seems that this technology ought to be adopted. I agree that it cannot be purchased by every school or library, but surely it is up to this State, our Government, and the education system to provide this technology to regional schools and libraries."

(Hansard page 7603, Legislative Council of NSW, 17 September 1998)

The effectiveness of this speech and Mr Vaughan's involvement shows the importance of political leadership on these issues. Since then we have seen the beginnings of awareness of the needs of Dyslexics, including new teaching methods and technology, and the will to implement solutions. The struggle to make people aware, in tandem with improvements in technology, the effectiveness of the law protecting the rights of disadvantaged people, in combination with political leadership, has resulted in real gains for people like myself

The NSW Education Department is in the final stages of a trial of the Kurzweil Technology. Hopefully with the implementation of this system in the NSW Education System, this may enable a positive outcome for schools in other areas of Australia to raise the education needs and standards of children with learning disabilities.

It is a well known fact that failure at school and poor literacy have a strong correlation with unemployment, youth suicide and criminal activity - the large majority of our prison population have literacy problems. I believe a large measure of this suffering could be avoided.

*I should say that I am in no way connected with the company, Optek Systems, that distributes the Kurzweil technology. The technology is one part of a jigsaw that, with a coordinated effort from many quarters, could greatly improve the lives of dyslexic people (which affects 1 in 7 people according to Government statistics) and generally benefit society by saving so many alienated people, who have previously been dumped in the "too hard basket".*

**THE COMMITTEE IS INVITED  
TO VIEW THE KYRZWEIL 3000 SYSTEM  
IN A SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT.**

The first Australian school to install Kurzweil 3000 was St. Peter's Catholic College, Tuggerah, on the Central Coast of NSW. As a member of the College Council, I would be pleased to make arrangements with the school for you to come and see how the system works, or at another location at your convenience.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE COMMITTEE FOR CHILDREN WITH DYSLEXIA

- The Kurzweil system or a system like it should be more widely available in schools. It will enable children who are in danger of falling behind because of their reading difficulties to keep on top of their schoolwork, and may also improve their unassisted reading ability in some cases. The current D.E.T Technology Trial by the NSW Education Department is a limited test of the Kurzweil 3000 restricted to just 2 or 3 primary schools, but studies in the U.S.A. show significant increases in reading rates for slow readers and one Canadian study shows an improvement in "Reading Age" of between 1 and 3 years for schoolchildren with learning difficulties.
- An important "missing link" needing attention from both the Department of Education and the Department Employment - ensuring that students who have successfully used programs like Kurzweil for their studies can continue to use it in the workplace. I wonder if the **Workplace Modification Scheme** (which subsidises employers for the purchase of equipment and environmental modifications for disabled employees) could be extended to include people with dyslexia?
- There is a need for a national awareness program to inform the general public about dyslexia and learning difficulties, and how great a handicap these disabilities can be. This would be to erase some popular misconceptions ("it's all in the mind" "they're lazy" "they're stupid"), to show intelligent and successful positive role models, and to help parents' spot where their children may be having difficulty and how they can be helped. There has also been a lot of misinformation in the media about "wonder cures" for dyslexia; if you are interested in current research, a good place to start would be the web site of the International Dyslexia Association.
- Could consideration be given to acceptance of oral submissions to Senate committees in future – because people like myself have considerable difficulty obtaining assistance to contribute to this forum in a written format?

## **Appendix A Brief Summary of Technology**

The Kurzweil 3000 print scanning / speaking software is effective in improving reading and comprehension for people with literacy disabilities eg: people with learning difficulties and dyslexia. It has been widely installed in the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States, and here in Australia in schools in the Catholic sector (eg St Peter's, Tuggerah), Independent sector (eg Trinity Grammar), and is being trialed by the D.E.T in a small number of primary schools in the Public sector. It has also been installed in a number of colleges of TAFE and Universities (eg Newcastle University) and in libraries (eg State Library of New South Wales). The Kurzweil System is effective from about Year 4 through secondary and tertiary, and as a workplace tool in employment.

The Kurzweil system is particularly effective if it is supported by trained Special Needs Support Teachers. Prof Terry Lovat, Pro Vice Chancellor of Newcastle University and Vice Chancellor of Catholic University are looking into including it as part of their curriculum for Special Needs Teachers.