

Submission

No 28

INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE 9-14 YEARS IN NSW

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Australian Association For Parents of Vision Impaired

Submission to

Inquiry into Children and Young People 9-14 Years in NSW

In response to the media release 17 March 2008, AAPVI has prepared this submission to the Inquiry into Children and Young People 9-14 Years in NSW.

AAPVI is an organisation formed in 2005 with many members in NSW. As the name suggests, AAPVI is a voluntary organisation made up of parents of the Vision Impaired of all ages. Our membership base is made up of parents predominately of a school age.

Vision impaired in all age groups can suffer single and multiple disabilities, additionally, the severity of the disability can vary from minor impairment to total vision impairment (blindness). Vision Impaired will be referred to as VI for the remainder of this submission.

AAPVI wishes to offer this submission to the Inquiry as a customer or “user” of the services provided to a vision impaired child and their families. For the purpose of this submission, AAPVI will attempt to maintain it’s submission as close as possible to the “terms of reference”.

1. The needs of children and young people in the middle years i.e. between about nine and fourteen years of age.

It is not uncommon for a VI child to have multiple disabilities. Compounded with an already heavy impairment, this means, that the needs of a VI child will be quite large and demanding. Where a sighted child's education begins covertly at home, a vision impaired child's education begins almost instantly after diagnosis. Where possible, specialist agencies are quick to react to ensure that the process begins. Some needs for VI children in the “middle years” are the same as most other sighted children. The key needs submitted to the inquiry for a VI child are,

- Mobility,
- Early intervention,
- Written communication, Braille,
- Familiarisation of surroundings, new and changing,
- Transport, public and private,
- Schooling,
- Technology,
- Family support groups,
- Support agencies.

2. The extent to which the needs of children and young people in the middle years vary according to age, gender and level of disadvantage.

The extent of support to assist a VI child can be best described as heavy, as listed in point 1. This increases proportionally with the level of the disability and how many other disabilities the child may have. The demand is constant regardless of whether the child is at school, home or recreating. Where some support agencies offer school holiday activities (without parents or careers) the need for chaperones for the children is required.

This point is hard to gauge, this mainly due to the varying circumstances surrounding each child. A VI child with a significant loss of sight in itself is demanding, a VI child with a second major disability, eg Cerebral palsy, will have an extremely high demand, multiple agencies will be involved, including respite. A child with a minor VI may have limited sight and therefore may have very little differences in needs to a sighted child.

3. The activities, services and support which provide opportunities for children and young people in the middle years to develop resilience;

Activities services and support is largely provided by non-government agencies to vision impaired children. They are,

- Vision Australia (formerly Royal Blind Society)
- NSW Guide Dogs
- RIDBC (Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children)
- AAPVI (Parents Association)
- RDA NSW (riding for the disabled)
- Blind Cricket NSW
- Paralympic Association
- Freedom Scientific
- Humanware

Government Agencies are;

- DoCS
- DADHC
- Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association of NSW

Access is the key aspect to the use of most of these facilities, a VI child being raised by disabled parents may not be able to access all of these agencies through no fault of their own. These families rely on the generosity of other family members, relatives, neighbours and community groups to gain access. Regional children 9-14 years of age may only have telephone access to these services, occasional visits may be possible and more remote areas this may be infrequent at the best. The greater the isolation the child resides in the less it will be supported.

The financial status of a VI child's parents will proportionally affect the levels of equipment the child will have access to at home. For any VI person to have all of the modern Braille equipment and software for home will cost between \$6000.00 and \$11,000.00, imagine trying to justify that for your 9-14 year old child. Financial support for this equipment is not available to all VI children. Their parents, due to current housing market costs, may not be able to afford to purchase the equipment needed.

4. The extent to which changing workplace practices have impacted on children and young people in the middle years, including possible changes to workplace practices which have the potential to benefit children and young people in the middle years.

Technological advancements in the past 20 years without a doubt has created the greatest changes to workplace practices for the vision impaired, these technological advancements are filtering through to the students and now used in the homes and schools of these people on a daily basis. The massive change to clerical based work practices has had the greatest effect, which is where most employable vision impaired people are aimed at. This has changed the way in which a vision impaired student must be taught.

Australia currently has one of the lowest employment rates of vision impaired persons in the 1st world, at approximately 30%, other first world countries employment rate is as high as 70%. It can be argued by AAPVI members of children within this inquiries bandwidth, that the education deficiencies observed in NSW public school system is not giving the vision impaired students a "fair go". The middle years of the child's development is observed to be the most lacking, by the time the student moves onto school certificate or HSC, in most cases it has greatly affected the child's education future and employability.

A common example that is used is describing current employment trends with VI people is; When dealing with internet and telephone based service providers, using a Windows based system, where no visual contact is made. This type of service is "the norm" in today's society. A customer doesn't need to know (and probably will not care) that the person at the other end is visually impaired using a Windows based talking program. If the service provider's representative is capable of achieving the customer's requests, the customer will be satisfied. Technology is available to teach VI children these systems.

Computer technology is introduced to all students at primary school in the early years that this inquiry is targeting. Students are usually computer literate well before the final years of the Inquiries target age group. For the vision impaired student, computer based talking programs, computer interfacing braille keyboards and computer adaptable braille embossing units are available (in fact there is a company already under contract to the NSW Department of Education to supply this equipment). Computer literacy in our modern society should be one of highest priorities for all vision impaired students, beginning at the "middle years". The NSW department of Education has information resource websites for the children to research projects and assignments. Internet Websites such as "U-tube" and "My space" in conjunction with "Messenger" and "chat rooms" offer an entertaining method of expanding the child's proficiency with computers. To highlight even greater the uses of computers, most Low Vision support agencies now offer on-line support to VI clients that are capable of using it.

Two major inequities exist in NSW public schools for VI students.

1. Ages 9-14 years old VI students in NSW public schools, state wide, are being taught different methods of Braille technology. There are children, the same age, in different parts of the state that are being taught "typewriter" technology while others are being taught "computer based" technology.

2. Ages 9-14 years old VI students in NSW public schools, in some parts of NSW are fully supported in their school environment, while others receive almost no support.

Both of these inequities have a direct effect on the student and their future employability. AAPVI has first hand knowledge of these inequities and its members are left with the flow on effects beyond school. Both Federal and state governments are left with the social services burden that improper schooling created.

AAPVI is not proposing that all "middle years" school teaching be totally computer based, however, equality within the states education system is a necessity. To say that modernising teaching practices to "middle years" school students would increase employability prospects for the vision impaired is an understatement.

5. Any other matter considered relevant to the inquiry by the Committee.

Rural VI families are some of the greatest disadvantaged families within AAPVI. In NSW services around Sydney, Wollongong, Newcastle and the ACT are reasonably well supported, the further West a person is the greater chances of a reduction of services. A lack of the following is common;

- Medical services,
- Support agencies,
- Specialist Teachers and Aides
- Access to Broad Band
- Little or no respite facilities
- Public Transport

AAPVI sincerely thanks the NSW Government for the opportunity to make this submission to the Inquiry into Children and Young People 9-14 Years in NSW.

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