

Submission

No 23

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

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Speech Pathology Australia



Giving people a say in life

Parliamentary Inquiry into Children and Young People 9-14 years in NSW.

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Speech Pathology Australia is the peak national body for the speech pathology profession in Australia. Speech pathologists are specialists who are trained to assess and treat people of all ages who have communication and swallowing difficulties. The NSW Branch executive of Speech Pathology Australia represents speech pathologists from metropolitan and rural settings within the paediatric, adult, disability, education and private practice arenas.

TERMS OF REFERENCE REFERRED TO IN THIS SUBMISSION

This submission will address the following Terms of Reference identified by the parliamentary committee:

1. The needs of children and young people in the middle years i.e. between about nine and fourteen years of age;
3. The activities, services and support which provide opportunities for children and young people in the middle years to develop resilience;
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.

ISSUES AFFECTING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN NSW

- Well developed spoken and written communication skills are fundamental to inter-personal relationships, academic and work success and overall contribution to society. Unfortunately, not all children and young people in NSW present with typically developing speech and language skills (communication skills). There is a significant prevalence of communication disorders in primary and secondary school students in NSW. In a recent study by McLeod and McKinnon (2007), 13% of primary and secondary school students within one school district in NSW presented with a communication disorder. This should be of concern to the NSW government as there is substantial evidence (see reference list) to indicate these students are:
 - Significantly more likely to have literacy problems and learning difficulties
 - At-risk for poorer academic outcome, early school exit and difficulties obtaining employment
 - More likely to be subject to bullying and suffer social-emotional distress
 - Often identified as having “behavioural” problems but in reality present with underlying communication difficulties that are not identified or supported
 - At risk of mental health problems

- Best practice in supporting students with communication disorders occurs when speech pathology services are embedded in schools (Speech Pathology Australia, 2004). Unfortunately this does not occur in NSW. Publically funded, embedded speech pathology services within schools in NSW are extremely limited for upper-primary school students and are virtually non-existent in secondary school settings. NSW school-aged students with communication disorders are also not targeted to receive individualized funding support, yet their need for support (considered on the basis of teacher interviews in the McKinnon and McLeod study, 2007) has been rated as moderate to very high. It is unrealistic to expect that these high levels of support can be achieved when school-based speech pathology services are not provided within NSW.
- In addition to students with communication disorders being at risk of mental health problems, there is also a high prevalence of language impairment for those students presenting for psychiatric treatment (Speech Pathology Australia 2001, 2008). NSW Youth Health and Mental Health services frequently do not have speech pathologists working within their teams or at best have limited access to consultative services. Speech pathologists have specialist skills that can assist students with mental health needs. Speech pathologists provide assessment and management services within team-based environments; mental health and youth health services should be no exception.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Policy adoption that mandates all students with communication disorders in NSW receive an appropriate level of speech pathology service. This should aim to achieve access and equity of speech pathology services and appropriate and timely educational and therapy support.
- Support students with communication disorder by establishing school-based speech pathology services for primary and secondary schools across NSW.
- Extend youth health and mental health services across NSW to include speech pathologists.

IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- State funding for the establishment of school-based speech pathology assessment and therapy services that are embedded within primary and secondary schools across NSW.
- Individualised funding for education and therapy support for students with communication disorder within primary and secondary schools across NSW.
- State funding for youth health and mental health services to employ speech pathologists specifically within these settings.
- The Parliamentary Committee to specifically recommend a state policy which would mandate the provision of appropriate levels of speech pathology services across NSW.

CONCLUSION

Speech Pathology Australia would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to raise these important issues. We look forward to the Committee's consideration of these recommendations. Should the Committee wish to further discuss the above submission, then enquiries should be forwarded to Carmel Violi, Speech Pathology Australia, NSW Branch Office via phone: (02) 9743 0013 or email: sppathnsw@email.cs.nsw.gov.au

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ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

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