

RE: NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into Children and young people with disability in New South Wales educational settings

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The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: I have a question about the curriculum. Is that a year 11 or year 12 stage 6 curriculum, or is it all stages?

CATHERINE MILLER: From kinder all the way to year 12.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Right. And it's offered as a HSC subject?

BRENT PHILLIPS: I believe we may have to take that question on notice. Last year in New South Wales there was the launch of Auslan as a language taught. There is a curriculum from K to 12. How that translates and how it's being delivered may be something we need to further investigate and to let you know.

Deaf Australia's Response:

Deaf Connect has provided a thorough response to this question.

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The CHAIR: We will indeed the ask the Government tomorrow when they appear. Are there any other oddities of New South Wales compared to the other States that we should be taking note of?

SHIRLEY LIU: Just trying to get some of our thoughts together. There are a couple we had mentioned before today, but they're just not coming to mind right now.

The CHAIR: That's okay. You could take that on notice if that's helpful. It would be good for us to know if there are other places doing it better.

Deaf Australia's Response:

Firstly, Deaf Australia wishes to emphasise that there is no evidence of deaf teachers (who use Auslan) working within the public education system in NSW. Deaf Auslan teachers are not teachers of the deaf – they are two very different roles with very different qualifications. The Department of Education clearly does not know this. We know deaf teachers of the deaf who communicate in Auslan experience significant barriers in being able to teach in the public education system. We stand by that, despite department denials, due to anecdotal evidence we have, anonymous stories told to us and submissions made to the Disability Royal Commission. The Department of Education is not going to admit to discriminatory practices in public.

We have seen examples of deaf teachers having to submit to hearing tests and being rejected based on 'failing' said hearing tests. This practice is an example of discriminatory behaviour that we know

about. In no other state or territory is this ever required of teachers wishing to register in the public education system. These teachers are afraid to come forward because they are rightly concerned they will be blacklisted from ever working within the education system at all.

Secondly, NSW has one deaf school – NextSense Primary School (also known as Thomas Pattison School) and that is a private school that provides bilingual education. The public school system does not have bilingual education programs that offer both Auslan and English. If there are units for deaf children, they are laughably called ‘hearing units.’¹ That is another oddity of NSW – there are no bilingual Auslan/English programs on offer. Auslan as a subject provided in schools is not bilingual education. A signing choir is not an example of bilingual education. The idea that either are examples of bilingual education demonstrates the paucity of knowledge, education and experiences the Department of Education officials have because it is very clear they do not know what a bilingual education looks like. No school with a LOTE (spoken language) program would seriously claim to be bilingual so why the nonsensical belief that an Auslan LOTE program in a school is a bilingual program?

To see what a bilingual program looks like we invite you to have a look at NextSense school to gain some insight. There are other examples across the country, such as Furlong Park School in Melbourne, Mosman Park in Western Australia, Klemzig Auslan Bilingual Pre-school in South Australia, Toowong in Queensland, to name a few.

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The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK: We've heard evidence today from various different groups. Representatives for autism and different disabilities and their respective associations have given us a range of views as to how they think we should proceed in including people with a disability in the current education system. I understand from what you've said earlier, Ms Liu and Brent, that all three of you are indicating that perhaps it's better not to have an individual deaf child turn up to one school and be there on their own, but rather to have a specific school that might be allocated per region. How would you suggest?

I'm just trying to understand, because we're getting different views. Autism Awareness Australia have the view that every mainstream school should accommodate children with autism. We're seeing a different view from what you said earlier—that perhaps it's much better for a child not to be isolated but rather to be with a group of friends or their peers and to learn together. Can I understand that a little bit? I also don't know much about the statistics in New South Wales, either, on what schools are available. It would be good to have that available. I don't think you've made a submission. We can make those inquiries as well, but perhaps that could be made available.

Deaf Australia's Response:

Despite the idealism of some in the disability sector when advocating for inclusive education, such as allmeansall.org.au, it is not practical or realistic to expect already overloaded and overburdened teachers to become experts across all types of disabilities and deafness. Just as you would not expect a surgeon experienced in obstetrics and gynecology to be expert in neurology, why would one expect teachers to be experts in all disabilities and deafness? Students with autism are a unique cohort, just as deaf children are a unique cohort, so each type of disability and deafness requires highly specialised teachers to provide the best quality education.

In this context, it means clustering deaf children within a school that has deaf teachers of the deaf (as well as hearing teachers who are fluent in Auslan) working there already. That way children are not isolated the way they currently are: one deaf child attending a local school surrounded by only hearing children and subject to poorly qualified visiting teachers who may attend once or twice a term if lucky. It is a myth and not backed by research that throwing a deaf child into the ocean of hearing people only will encourage (or force!) them to 'hear and speak.' They are more likely to drown than swim. Language development does not operate like that – it is on the same stage as the concept that putting a child in front of a television will support their spoken language (it does the opposite) and only sets the stage for lifelong very expensive costs in the context of physical health, social and emotional health and employment opportunities. We do not advocate for inclusion as it stands – over 80% of deaf children are mainstreamed with highly variable results, more likely on the lower spectrum of success.

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SHIRLEY LIU: If I could add to that, as well, Victoria has a bilingual school but in New South Wales we see an array of deaf units. The exact numbers I don't have on hand, but there are a few of those units or whole of schools which we have collected data from in terms of how many use Auslan and how many use English to communicate, and then in terms of their barriers for their learning experiences as well. When the survey does become available, I will share that with the Committee, of course.

Deaf Australia's Response:

We wish to add to this statement by stating that deaf units are primarily hearing units in New South Wales as stated above and do not offer a bilingual education in the context of Auslan and English on a day-to-day basis. There is a survey currently being readied for publication from NextSense; we have been informed at the time of writing that the release of the results from the survey has been delayed. This gives an idea – an incomplete one – of roughly how many children use Auslan as their primary language and how many children do not.

¹ Hearing units perpetuate the myth that deaf children are hearing children with hearing aids and cochlear implants to make them 'hearing' – they aren't, and no respectable peer-reviewed research and best practices in deaf education encourage this myth. Hearing aids and cochlear implants are tools, just as other assistive devices are tools used to support navigation through the hearing world.