

**Submission
No 16**

**INQUIRY INTO THE PROVISION OF EDUCATION TO
STUDENTS WITH A DISABILITY OR SPECIAL NEEDS**

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LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL OF NSW

GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE NO. 2

**Submission to the Inquiry into the provision of education to
students
with a disability or special needs**

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This submission is made on my own behalf. I believe that at the present time, I am the only full-time academic in Australia working in the area of postgraduate teacher education for students with vision impairments. My submission focuses upon several of the critically important issues facing the education of students in our State who are blind or have low vision. I am employed by a charitable agency with a keen sense of mission. The issues I will raise are predicated on a continued harmonious working relationship between Commonwealth, State and Territory governments.

The professional association for Australian and New Zealand educators of students who are blind or vision impaired in South Pacific Educators in Vision Impairment (SPEVI). Its website is at <http://www.e-bility.com/spevi/>

The Association has a professional journal, a periodic newsletter and hosts a biennial conference. This will be held in 2011 in Sydney. SPEVI has also adopted a set of principles and standards that have been generated from observations of the best practice in the South Pacific region. These can be found at: <http://www.e-bility.com/spevi/resources.php>

1 Much current overseas demographic data affirm that educators will increasingly have to address the needs of individuals with low vision. In Australia, the NSW Department of Education and Training has suggested that the ratio of students with low vision as opposed to students who are blind in our schools is in the region of 4:1. The Department has identified the population of students with low vision as being most at risk of failure in literacy and numeracy. There are significant differences in students who are blind and those who are vision impaired with regard to the strategies used to acquire literacy and numeracy. For students who are blind: braille literacy skills, listening, aural reading and technology-related skills are highly important. For those whose primary medium is print; visual skills, use of aural reading and technology-related skills are important

- 2 Students with vision impairments in NSW schools should and generally do receive the same curricula as that received by their sighted peers, and in addition, should be afforded access to all areas of the expanded core curriculum (i.e. the special skills necessitated by their visual disability). Commonwealth, state and territory governments should together give careful consideration to the initiation and development of researching methods that will facilitate this goal.
- 3 The Commonwealth, state and territory governments should together actively encourage resource production agencies to collaborate on the standardisation of mutually acceptable guidelines for alternative format production (i.e. for print, Braille and related tactile resources).
- 4 The Commonwealth, state and territory governments should together fund the implementation costs of Australia having adopted the Unified English Braille Code, considering the long-term benefits that will flow to a significant number of disadvantaged students and their families..
- 5 Educational authorities, production agencies, publishers and advocates that are major stakeholders in policy and program development should become apprised of recent moves towards passage of the Instructional Materials Accessibility Act of 2001 in the USA. These agencies should consider the feasibility, in Australia, of implementing similar national legislation, including the establishment of a national electronic repository of published documents that are typically used as text or reference materials in Australian schools.
- 6 Educational authorities and agencies that are major stakeholders in policy and program development, or which are involved in direct service delivery to students who are blind or vision impaired should formally investigate the need for greater professional preparation and professional development to enhance the literacy and numeracy acquisition of the students who are within their organisational purview.
- 7 The Commonwealth, state and territory governments should together recommend that all generic classroom teachers be required to have at least one subject in their pre-service degree that relates to teaching children with special needs and in which there is a section on literacy and numeracy curricular adaptations for students who are blind or vision impaired.
- 8 Commonwealth and state and territory government education departments should work collaboratively with a variety of public and private agencies and parents so that positive early education experiences are provided from the time of the child's birth.
- 9 The Commonwealth together with state and territory governments should initiate formal research into the area of tactile graphics, particularly reviewing the area of skills acquisition, since resources for teaching tactile graphics are difficult to obtain. There is currently great

need within school systems for training of specialised preparation personnel, proofreaders and teachers.

- 10 Educational authorities and agencies that are major stakeholders in policy and program development, or that are involved in direct service delivery to students, should provide as a matter of high importance, infrastructure for access and use of the technologies necessary for literacy and numeracy acquisition by students who are blind or vision impaired.
- 11 There is little Australian research relating to students who are blind or vision impaired. There is need for considerable developmental work and research in literacy, numeracy and students with vision impairments from within the Australian multicultural context. It is highly important, therefore, that competent empirical longitudinal evaluation studies are conducted of the literacy and numeracy programs used with students who are blind or vision impaired in Australian public and independent or private schools.
- 12 There currently exist little coherent policy or planning that affects the teaching of literacy and numeracy to students who are blind or vision impaired in Australian schools nation-wide. There is need to coordinate planning at the national level for literacy and numeracy programs and to initiate research into the efficacy of the plans as existing programs are modified or new programs implemented. The Commonwealth Government should seek and be guided by information on the National Agenda for the Education of Students who are Blind or Vision Impaired, recently adopted in the United States and our State needs to promote this issue.
- 13 It is essential that educational authorities ensure an adequate provision of skilled and competent specialist staff, for example, managers, visiting and consulting teachers, orientation and mobility instructors along with technical support personnel, in schools. Commonwealth, state and territory governments should consider coordinating discussions that would result in a more equitable spread of vision impairment specialists throughout districts, regions, states and territories within Australia, with particular attention to the needs of rural and remote areas.
- 14 The Commonwealth, together with state and territory governments, should take steps to ensure that the education in literacy and numeracy of students who are blind or vision impaired be formally acknowledged as an integral part of the National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century and the National Literacy and Numeracy Plan. At the present time, this is not the case.
- 15 The Commonwealth, together with state and territory governments should pay particular attention, in the context of recent resource allocations through the Commonwealth's Strategic Assistance for

Improving Student Outcomes Program, to special literacy and numeracy acquisition resource needs of students who are blind or vision impaired.

- 16 Towards obtaining comprehensive national data for planning and more effective service delivery, educational authorities and agencies that are major stakeholders in policy and program development, or that are involved in direct service delivery to students who are blind or vision impaired, should plan the collection and dissemination of useful statistical information on a variety of matters affecting the literacy and numeracy acquisition for the students they serve. This information should include, for example, results of an annual census of the number and disposition of Braille, and low vision technology using students nationally.
- 17 The Commonwealth, state and territory governments should consider auspicing and coordinating a consultative group to develop benchmarks for the appropriate delivery of the expanded core curriculum to students who are blind or vision impaired, with emphasis on literacy and numeracy acquisition and retention, consistent with commonwealth, state and territory education policies, the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act and other legislation, regulation and policies.
- 18 There is at this time almost no high technology research and development related to the educational needs of students who are blind or vision impaired in our schools, perhaps with the exception of initiatives sponsored by Quantum Technology Pty Inc. This is a vitally important area needing Government interest and involvement.