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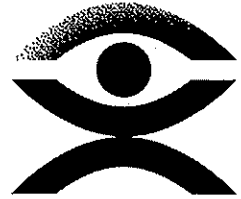
## **INQUIRY INTO THE PROVISION OF EDUCATION TO STUDENTS WITH A DISABILITY OR SPECIAL NEEDS**

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# Submission

**New South Wales Legislative Council:  
GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING  
COMMITTEE NO. 2**

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

February 2010

General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2  
Parliament House  
Macquarie Street  
Sydney NSW 2000

Via email: [gpscno2@parliament.nsw.gov.au](mailto:gpscno2@parliament.nsw.gov.au)

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# **1. ABOUT BLIND CITIZENS AUSTRALIA**

Blind Citizens Australia is the peak national representative organisation of people who are blind or vision impaired. Our mission is to achieve equity and equality by our empowerment, by promoting positive community attitudes, and by striving for high quality and accessible services which meet our needs. As the national peak body we have over 3100 individual members, 16 branches nationwide; in metropolitan, regional and rural locations and 13 affiliate organisations that represent the interests of Australians who are blind or vision impaired.

As such, it is important for Blind Citizens Australia to advocate for equality in areas of community participation and social inclusion for all Australians who are blind or vision impaired.

Blind Citizens Australia is funded by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) to provide policy advice to the Australian Government and other agencies relating to people who are blind or vision impaired.

## **2. TERMINOLOGY**

- 2.1 Except where otherwise stated, the term blind includes both people who are blind and people who are vision impaired.
- 2.2 'Accessible format' includes large print, Braille, audio and e-text formats.
- 2.3 'Preferred format' refers to the provision of material in an accessible format of the student's choice.
- 2.4 'Assistive technology' includes equipment which provides; magnification, text-to-speech software, Braille or tactile output.
- 2.5 'Core curriculum' means the required components completed by all students undertaking a course of study.

- 2.6 Expanded core curriculum' means the curriculum of instruction in blindness specific skills which a student who is blind requires in order to participate successfully in education. These blindness specific skills include; orientation & mobility skills development, proficiency in the use of assistive technology, self advocacy & interpersonal skills, Braille literacy and daily living skills.

### **3. INTRODUCTION**

- 3.1 As the nation's peak consumer representative organisation for Australians who are blind, Blind Citizens Australia is pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry into the provision of education to New South Wales primary and secondary school students with disability and special needs. We are also available to appear in person to elaborate on any of the issues under consideration by the Committee as they relate to the specialised needs of NSW primary or secondary school students who are blind.

### **4. OVERVIEW**

#### **4.1 Education.**

Blind Citizens Australia believes that education is the bedrock of our society, providing our children with the reasoning, knowledge and skills that will allow them to have a fully integrated life in Australian society. Our expectation is that all children, regardless of disability, must be given every opportunity to excel in academics, sport, recreation and community life.

#### **4.2 Assessment of educational need.**

Consultations with our members indicate that while disability-related needs are generally being identified successfully, the various education mechanisms in place, for a variety of reasons, are unable to adequately address the needs of NSW school students who are blind.

From our experience as people who are blind and as parents of children who are blind, it is clear that the educational needs of blind children are:

- literacy and numeracy through instruction in Braille
- curriculum and instructional materials in accessible formats, that is, Braille, large print, electronic and audio
- assistance from itinerant special needs teachers
- training in blindness specific skills, including effective vision use, Braille literacy, orientation and mobility, use of assistive technology, daily living skills, study skills and interpersonal skills.

In particular, Braille is the key to literacy and central to numeracy for many people, especially children who are blind.

We are also aware of the differing services available for rural and remote students who are blind in comparison to their metropolitan counterparts. Students who are outside of metropolitan and regional centres have a much lower level of access to support from Itinerant Teachers, and particularly Itinerant Teachers with blindness skills.

In addition to these concerns, Blind Citizens Australia is alarmed by the apparent lack of consistency in developing Individual Education Plans (IEP) and the reluctance to use benchmark testing that can be, and needs to be used to inform each student IEP. When children who are blind are being excused, or discouraged, from taking standard benchmark tests to ascertain their levels of literacy, numeracy and skill, they are being denied the opportunity to have the appropriate assistance that will promote best possible educational outcomes.

#### **4.3 Literacy.**

Children learn words, spelling, syntax, grammar punctuation and language through reading. A child who is blind and who is properly instructed in Braille and who has Braille materials available to him or her can use reading by Braille in the

same way as a sighted child will use reading by print to acquire knowledge, skills and literacy. A child who is blind and who is not given adequate Braille instruction cannot develop the same competency in literacy as a sighted child. As a result, the child is disadvantaged later in life when he or she has to function in a print literate world competing for educational places and jobs and educating his/her own children.

It is not an exaggeration to say that a blind person who does not have sound Braille reading and writing skills is functionally disadvantaged. Many children who are vision impaired and do not receive Braille training can become functionally illiterate in later years when their vision impairment progresses and they are no longer able to read with magnification assistance.

It is not possible to acquire knowledge of words, spelling, punctuation, syntax and grammar from reading a book on an audio cassette or by reading by a computer with voice output. We have seen that a focus on sole audio learning without Braille literacy has created a generation of young adults who present articulately in a vocal capacity, but present poorly in written correspondence. This has the impact of affecting the public perceptions of the person's skills and aptitude and can also further stereotypes of the capacity of others who are blind or vision impaired.

It is generally accepted, that prior to the 1970s, most children who were blind received quality Braille instruction. This training could be reasonably assured in an era during which children who were blind received their primary education in special schools for the blind and in which Braille instruction was a valued and crucial component of the curriculum.

Today, most children who are blind attend integrated schools. This is a development which Blind Citizens Australia welcomes and supports. However, some of NSW's



children who are blind have paid an educational price for the benefits of social integration. In an integrated setting, there has been a serious decline in the value placed on, and the priority given to, providing a child who is blind with blindness specific skills such as Braille literacy. The result is that many children, who are blind today, do not have the same opportunities that previous generations had to acquire sound Braille skills and literacy.

We are aware, through the involvement of our members in the education of children both as professionals and as parents, that instruction in Braille is not always available to children who need it, that teachers are not receiving adequate training in Braille and that students are not acquiring proficiency in Braille and literacy. We are concerned by the decline in Braille literacy we observe among younger people who are blind and its implications for them in education, employment and daily life.

Blind Citizens Australia asserts that all children who are blind or vision impaired need to be taught Braille literacy skills. Many vision impairment conditions are progressive and a young school-aged child who has limited but usable vision may well progressively lose the ability to use that visual acuity over time. Without an understanding and competency in Braille any such person may well become functionally illiterate in later life.

#### **4.4 Access to information.**

As we have indicated earlier, one of the key requirements for successful literacy for students who are blind is to have access to information in their preferred format. In order for primary and secondary school students who are blind to maintain comparative levels of literacy, numeracy, knowledge and reasoning skills as their sighted peers, it is essential that all learning material be available in accessible formats at the same time as printed material is available for sighted students.

In his opening remarks at the 2008 Blind Citizens Australia National Convention, Parliamentary Secretary for Disability and Children Services, the Honourable Bill Shorten, stated that blindness was “an information disability rather than a physical disability.”

Blind Citizens Australia sees this as a key distinction in the way in which all Australians who are blind are perceived, particularly young people and students. Our belief is that in viewing blindness in this light, as an information disability, the barriers that prohibit full participation are more easily identified and therefore more easily dismantled.

Blind Citizens Australia believes that with an awareness of the barriers to obtaining the greatest possible education for school students, all efforts must therefore be made by the NSW Government, the NSW Department of Education and Training, school districts and educators to ameliorate these barriers to education for students who are blind.

#### **4.5 Core Curriculum**

Blind Citizens Australia, as previously stated, supports the integrated school approach available to students with disabilities in NSW, however we strongly assert that as part of integration, it is necessary that primary and secondary school students who are blind be exposed to the same curriculum, with appropriate accommodations, as their sighted counterparts,

Students who are blind should have non-discriminatory access to core curriculum, extra-curricular activities, support services, work experience, sport and recreation and should not be excluded from these activities by reason of their blindness.

Where modifications or adaptations to the core curriculum or extra-curricular activities are required by reason of a person's blindness, these should be made in consultation with the student/parent and/or an advocate and/or a

professional with appropriate qualifications in the field of vision impairment.

Core curriculum instruction, assessment material and material for extra-curricular activities should be available to students who are blind, in their preferred format, at the same time that it is available to other students.

#### **4.6 Expanded Core Curriculum.**

In addition to the general core curriculum, students who are blind should have access to instruction in the blindness specific skills they require to participate in education, sport and recreation.

All instruction in blindness specific skills should be provided by staff with appropriate training and professional qualifications in these skills. School students who are blind should not have to make do with instruction in these vital skills from unqualified teachers.

We are aware of incidents in which school children have received Braille training from Itinerant Teachers who have levels of Braille proficiency barely above that of the student they are teaching. Unfortunately, in rural and remote school districts, these incidents are often more the rule, rather than the exception.

There is a wealth of international research and information on the value and essential nature of the *Expanded Core Curriculum*. So much of the learning process and environmental awareness that is vital for a full and participatory life is attained by sight for most people. In order that students who are blind be able to navigate, function and excel in society they need to be taught many of the instinctual life skills that sighted people accept as second nature.

One of the best and all-encompassing models of the *Expanded Core Curriculum* has been developed by the

Texas School for the Blind, which enumerates and expands on all the life-skills that a child who is blind needs to be taught.

Another model that Blind Citizens Australia believes has great merit in its capacity to meet the blindness specific educational needs of children who are blind is the National Unified Life skills Model (NUML).

#### **4.7 Education / employment**

While there are no statistics available regarding the educational outcomes for NSW school students who are blind, Blind Citizens Australia and other blindness organisations are aware of anecdotal data indicating that students who are blind transitioning from school to work are often found to be insufficiently educated in order to be able to participate in full, rich and independent lives to the same extent as their sighted counterparts.

Education provides the means to full social, economic, cultural and political participation, and many NSW students who are blind transition from school without the necessary educational skills that enable tertiary education, training or employment and full participation in community life.

Vision Australia's 2007 Employment report states that 63 percent of working age people who are blind, are either unemployed or underemployed. With the current NSW unemployment rate being approximately one tenth of this figure, it is apparent that the NSW education provided to students who are blind is not meeting their needs. Thus resulting in a system which is transitioning many NSW students who are blind from school without the necessary skill set to find and retain employment.

#### **4.8 The Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act 1992 governs all States and Territories with the purpose of "to eliminate, as far as possible, discrimination against people with disabilities" and under Section 22 of the Act,**

it is “unlawful for an educational authority to discriminate against a person on the ground of the person’s disability...”.

In 2005, the *Disability Standards for Education* was formulated, laying out the specifics of education anti-discrimination principles.

Blind Citizens Australia understands these *Standards* to apply to both direct and indirect discrimination in the provision of educational services across all States and Territories.

**4.9 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Australia ratified in 1990, has several protections for education including,**

Article 23.3. “Recognizing the special needs of a disabled child, assistance ...designed to ensure that the disabled child has effective access to and receives education, training, health care services, rehabilitation services, preparation for employment and recreation opportunities in a manner conducive to the child's achieving the fullest possible social integration and individual development...”

**4.10 Additionally, education for students with disability is protected under Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disability, “Article 24 - Education**

*1. States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and life long learning directed to:*

The full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity;

The development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential;

Enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society.

*2. In realizing this right, States Parties shall ensure that:*

Persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability, and that children with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary education, or from secondary education, on the basis of disability;

Persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live;

Reasonable accommodation of the individual's requirements is provided;

Persons with disabilities receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education;

Effective individualized support measures are provided in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion.

*3. States Parties shall enable persons with disabilities to learn life and social development skills to facilitate their full and equal participation in education and as members of the community. To this end, States Parties shall take appropriate measures, including:*

Facilitating the learning of Braille , alternative script, augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication and orientation and mobility skills, and facilitating peer support and mentoring;

Facilitating the learning of sign language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the deaf community;

Ensuring that the education of persons, and in particular children, who are blind, deaf or deafblind, is delivered in the

most appropriate languages and modes and means of communication for the individual, and in environments which maximize academic and social development.

*4. In order to help ensure the realization of this right, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to employ teachers, including teachers with disabilities, who are qualified in sign language and/or Braille, and to train professionals and staff who work at all levels of education. Such training shall incorporate disability awareness and the use of appropriate augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, educational techniques and materials to support persons with disabilities.”*

## **5 TERMS OF REFERENCE**

### **5.1 The nature, level and adequacy of funding for the education of children with a Disability**

Blind Citizens Australia is disappointed with the lack of statistical information that is available on the education of students with disability in NSW, particularly the dearth of information that has been collected on school students who are blind.

Through ongoing consultation with parents, professionals and service providers of education services in NSW, we understand that the levels of resourcing, at all levels, for NSW school students who are blind is inadequate to provide the equity of education that is mandated in Australia's anti-discrimination instruments.

We are too often being made aware of incidents in which school students who are blind are not getting the specialized educational assistance they require in order to bring their literacy and numeracy levels up to their school-age benchmark.

Additionally, there is much anecdotal data regarding the lack of access to assistive technology that many students who are blind need in order to read, write and participate with their peers.

In one specific instance a year-9 student was told that he would need to wait until a year-12 student finished school in order to have access to the only accessible laptop in the school. This clearly identifies a chronic lack of sufficient funding and a lack of readily available resources to provide students who are blind with the tools that can provide them with a level playing field in the areas of literacy, transitioning to the workplace or post high school education or training.

Blind Citizens Australia sees this as a fundamental failure of the NSW education system to provide every child with the best chance for a fully integrated life of social inclusion.

With no statistical information available on the education outcomes for NSW school students with disability it is difficult to make accurate distinctions in the area's in which the education needs of students who are blind are being adequately addressed and more importantly, those areas in which the education system is falling short and leaving students who are blind, unprepared for tertiary education, training or employment.

- 5.2. Best practice approaches in determining the allocation of funding to children with a disability, particularly whether allocation should be focused on a student's functioning capacity rather than their disability. As all students, regardless of disability, have differing levels of need and functioning capacity, Blind Citizens Australia recommend that all funding and resource allocation for NSW students, who are blind, be specifically allocated based on the individual students needs.

Blindness specific services and support services should be resourced across the state at a sufficient level to enable all



school students who are blind to achieve their educational goals and to exercise educational choices on a non-discriminatory basis.

Procedures for the allocation of funds and services to students should enable a student/parent to know their entitlements prior to the start of an academic year. Criteria and assessment measures should be framed and administered in a way which enables submissions for the allocation of funds and services to be made on the basis of a student's individual needs.

Where an application for funding is successful, funds should be provided in a suitable time period which enables the purchase of necessary services and equipment at the commencement of the funding period.

We are particularly concerned about reports of funding being granted for the purpose of specialised training for students with disability, and then being used for general purpose funding, with the explanation that children who have disability will also benefit from these general purpose expenditures.

### **5.3. The level and adequacy of current special education places within the education system.**

In consultation with our membership and service providers in NSW, we are aware of many instances in which NSW school students who are blind, have had very positive and productive educational experiences. Invariably, these students have been those who attended school in districts which provided a higher level of resources. The majority of these students benefited from access to specialised resource centres for students with vision impairment. Unfortunately, these students are by no means indicative of the experience of the majority of NSW school students, who are blind,

We believe that in order to provide all students with disability, the highest chance of successfully completing high school, all NSW school students who are blind should have the right to exercise educational choices on a non-discriminatory basis.

The educational choices of school students who are blind should not be limited by discriminatory assumptions or restrictions on available blindness support services. Such choice should not be limited by geographic location, choice of educational institution or course delivery mode, for example government or non-government setting, specialist or mainstream facility.

Neither should the educational opportunities available to all NSW school students who are blind be restricted by: discriminatory assumptions, stereotypes about blindness and its implications for a student's academic success and personal safety or well-being.

We believe all school students who are blind must have the same rights as others to attempt courses of study. They must have the option to experience the full range of learning opportunities and extra-curricular activities and to succeed or fail according to their personal ability. It is unacceptable that any NSW school student who is blind should fail in any of their educational pursuits because of a lack of access to full and equitable learning opportunities.

The option of education in a specialist blindness school should be available to those students for whom this option is considered appropriate and where such special schools exist. The appropriateness of education in a special school setting should be determined by an informed decision made by the student and/or parents.

#### **5.4. The adequacy of integrated support services for children with a disability in mainstream settings, such as school classrooms**

As we have indicated above, Blind Citizens Australia understands that the most positive educational outcomes for school students, who are blind, are achieved when specialised services and resources are adequately provided throughout all stages of schooling; be this in an integrated setting, such as a main-stream school or a specialised blindness school environment.

## **5.5 The provision of a suitable curriculum for intellectually disabled and conduct disordered students**

While Blind Citizens Australia by no means considers blindness as an intellectual learning disability, there are some very significant issues around the need for specialised educational needs for school students, who are blind.

In addition to the general core curriculum, all school students who are blind should have access to instruction in the blindness specific skills they require to participate in education, sport and recreation.

There are a range of essential skills which all children who are blind must be taught if they are to have the best possible prospect of living an independent, full and participatory life to the same extent as their sighted counterparts.

Blind Citizens Australia is adamant in our commitment that all children who are blind have the teaching of not only the core curriculum, but also full exposure to what is internationally referred to as the Expanded Core Curriculum. Educators who implement the Expanded Core Curriculum understand that school students who are blind have educational needs that are in addition to the core curriculum required for sighted students. These include orientation and mobility skills, Braille music, daily living skills, technology skills, numeracy skills and map-reading skills. These are all in addition to the regular school curriculum.

We recommend that instruction in blindness specific skills should be provided by staff with appropriate training and professional qualifications in these skills. It is unacceptable that some NSW school students who are blind are being taught these vital skills by teachers and teachers-aides who are not fully trained and conversant in these skills.

#### **5.6 Student and family access to professional support and services, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and school counsellors**

Early intervention programs are particularly important for young blind children. This is a time for the beginning of concept development and parents need to be supported to help their child learn about the world. In addition, many preschoolers who are blind are tactile defensive, that is, in the absence of the reassurance of sight, the child is easily frightened when his/her hands come into contact with unfamiliar surfaces. In these cases the child needs encouragement and assistance to explore their environment safely. As 80% of what we learn is through our vision, the absence of vision means that many skills, concepts and behaviours that a sighted child would learn incidentally, need to be specifically taught to a child who is blind. Exposure to a range of early experiences is critical. Early and pre-Braille skills enhance a child's readiness to learn Braille and need to be specifically taught prior to the child attending school.

Early intervention programs have been shown to be effective and while some are readily available in metropolitan and some regional centres in NSW, in rural and remote areas of the state, families rarely see an early intervention specialist. Additionally, the majority of families rely on ophthalmologists to put them in touch with appropriate facilities to obtain support for their blind child. While this works well in some cases, there are many areas where the ophthalmologist rarely visits and little is known of available services. This may mean that some critical time elapses before families are put in touch with appropriate support.

## **5.7 The provision of adequate teaching training, both in terms of pre-service and ongoing professional training.**

Blind Citizens Australia is aware that many of NSW's school students who are blind do not have adequate access to a Itinerant Teacher. A child needs tuition in Braille on a regular basis to build his/her Braille reading and writing skills. As one mother of a vision impaired child explained, "a sighted child receives instruction in literacy each day. A blind child, who uses Braille, only receives effective instruction in literacy when the Itinerant teacher visits once a week". Our members have expressed concern about the student/teacher ratio of Itinerant teachers who are qualified to teach Braille in rural and remote areas.

While Braille training and literacy is unquestionably the cornerstone for children who are blind or who have severe vision impairment, it is only one of the key skills that will enable a student who is blind to remain abreast of their sighted peers in terms of educational attainment and social participation. Itinerant teachers and classroom teachers need to be conversant with all of the assistive tools that students who are blind use and need.

It is common knowledge that school students at very early ages are being instructed in the use of computers; however students who are blind are being left out of this increasingly important medium because teachers are not skilled in the use of screen magnifiers and screen-reading software.

In some areas of NSW, students in non-government schools do not have the same access to Itinerant teachers as students in Government schools.

There also appears to be a perception amongst some educators that teacher aide time, where it is available, will meet all of a student's needs and can be a substitute for a trained teacher of the vision impaired. Whilst teacher aide

time is significantly cheaper than teacher time, teacher aides are not trained teachers and should not be expected to do the job of a trained teacher. Where students do have access to a specialist teacher, these teachers may not be trained in vision impairment. In some cases, the school is not serviced by a teacher at all but by another professional, for example, a social worker.

Blind Citizens Australia holds grave concerns for the future of teaching NSW's students who are blind. In the past, there were a number of specialist pre-service programs specifically for teachers interested in teaching children who are blind. This is no longer the case. We are aware of only one remaining specialist pre-service program, which is only offered every second year.

Non-specialist teachers will receive at best a couple of lectures during their pre-service university course about the learning needs of students who are blind. There is also a dearth of post-graduate opportunities for teachers to specialise in teaching children who are blind. What courses exist are largely delivered via distance learning.

This means that newly graduated regular classroom teachers have little knowledge of students who are blind and their needs. However, of more concern is the decline in the number of teachers with skills in blindness specific areas, including an understanding of Braille and the techniques for teaching the reading and writing of Braille. The Australian Braille Authority has advised that less than forty per cent of Itinerant teachers possess basic Grade 2 literary Braille skills. Moreover, skills in math and music Braille are exceedingly rare. As we clearly stated earlier, Braille is an essential skill for students who are blind.

With our universities not providing appropriate courses for teachers who wish to work with blind students, it is highly likely that future generations of children will not have access to teachers with the requisite skills to teach them basic literacy.

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