

Submission
No 338

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

Organisation: Dubbo District Parent Support Group for the Hearing Impaired
Inc and Dubbo Itinerant Support Teachers

Date received: 19/02/2010

**The Director
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2
Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000**

To The Director,

Re: Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs.

In regard to the Terms of Reference, there are areas of the support services offered to hearing impaired students of NSW DET schools that we would like the committee to investigate and then consider options for change at this inquiry.

Comments to each term of reference are made with a specific focus on services for deaf and hearing impaired students and their families.

Term of reference

1. The nature, level and adequacy of funding for the education of children with a disability.

The current criteria for a hearing impaired children to access specialised Itinerant Hearing Support Service is based on a formula of averages of hearing loss over the ranges of 500hz, 1,000hz and 2,000hz bilaterally (both ears). The average must be at least 30db for a child to meet DET access request criteria.

Children with a high frequency hearing loss receive no funding despite a huge impact on their ability to access speech range (predominantly female voices), classroom information and therefore Key Learning Areas.

Also students with a unilateral hearing loss (hearing loss in one ear) can only receive support on a special consideration application if there are enough hours on the current database. If there are not any hours available, these students do not get any support regardless of their needs. Research shows that these students may experience similar issues as children who have bi-lateral hearing loss.

Up until the changes to the levels of support provided to Deaf and hearing impaired students of NSW were implemented, the level and adequacy of funding has in most areas been considered equitable. Students were provided with the levels of support necessary for them to participate and access their schooling equally. In recent months, the NSW DET has made substantial changes to the level of time allocation for the specialist hearing support services provided to the hearing impaired students in public schools.

The "formula" for support for trained teachers of the deaf to be applied to individual students is based on "common cluster hours" from across the state. These "formula" derived hours are supposed to reflect adequate support when considering aspects such as level of hearing loss, communication mode, class placement, and chronological age.

Using this formula of cluster hours the number of hours allocated is supposed to match the degree of hearing

loss, age, enrolment status. For example a student on an itinerant caseload with a severe sensori-neural bilateral hearing loss will only receive up to 4 hours per week of trained teacher of the deaf support. A profoundly deaf sign dependent student can have 6 hours of support. A pre-schooler regardless of hearing level can have maximum of 2.

Early intervention was supposed to be a high priority for any child let alone one that has a disability? A student with hearing loss with additional needs who may be in a support class setting also would only be entitled to 2 hours per week. This formula lumps all students with a particular hearing loss into one basket and fails in providing for the explicit inherent individual needs of the children that the hearing loss may cause.

There are many issues that present cases that are outside the parameters of the formula the DET of NSW use. We hear of these parameters referred to as the "four legs" on the table. If a hearing impaired child has these "four legs" then this formula may be adequate. This child may have early diagnosis, early access to intervention and specialist medical and educational services, parents that are competent to assist with all needs, and no other issues in regard to intellectual, behavioural or mental health. However, in reality, for many children, there isn't even one leg on that table.

ALL factors need to be considered when calculating an appropriate level of support including, but not limited to, level of hearing loss, communication mode, class placement, chronological age, and age of diagnosis. Factors that have an increased impact on a student's level of functioning, and are magnified in country areas especially, may include, but are not limited to, socio economic status, access to health services such as Australian Hearing, ENT and the Sydney Cochlear Implant Centre, specialist support services providing auditory verbal strategies, specialist early intervention language centres such as the Shepherd Centre, access to Auslan interpreters and Auslan classes.

Also very relevant is the success of any technology used by the individual. Are they accessing more than one mode of communication? Do they have additional disabilities or issues with behaviour that impact their learning style? Is the parent actively involved? Do the parents feel supported, confident and competent supporting their child's intensive needs in language, speech, auditory skills and the wide ranging issues that will have an impact all throughout the child's life?

Term of Reference

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 disability.

Term of reference

All students are individuals regardless of having a disability. All factors regarding each individual's different qualities must be understood and considered when deciding how to best support them. The functioning abilities of the Deaf/hearing impaired student will be very individual, and therefore the allocation of funding must be based on an individual need not a state enforced formula. Many individual factors that impact a deaf/hearing impaired individual are mentioned throughout this letter.

The NSW Health department acknowledge a hearing test failure as 20db across all frequencies, however the NSW. D.E.T. hearing loss access criteria is 30db with the average taken over only 3 frequencies of - 500hz, 1,000hz and 2,000hz.

This discrepancy results in NSW Health workers testing children with no follow up by D.E.T. Health workers are making an effort to screen as many children as possible, but then when found many of these children cannot access support because they do not meet the DET criteria and with low level hearing loss continue through the education system unable to access learning through hearing.

Term of reference

3. The level and adequacy of current special education places within the education system.

International research clearly shows that deaf sign dependent students perform better when in a classroom with fellow students learning in a signed language with a teacher fluent in a signed language. While overseas practice is to increase the number of schools for the deaf and support classes for deaf students, the NSW department of education has continued to reduce the number of deaf/hearing impaired support classes leaving a mainstream placement as the only option for these students. This requires additional resources. The provision of additional resources is extremely inadequate!

The Itinerant Support teacher supports children from diagnosis. This may mean that the child receiving support is an infant, pre-schooler, or of school age.

If a parent is seeking specialised early intervention for hearing impaired children, this is offered outside the DET, but at a cost, be it the travel and accommodation involved to get there, and or the fees charged by the providers.

Also counsellor support for parents of newly diagnosed babies is not available in country areas, but is available from several services in metropolitan areas. In country areas both early intervention and parent support are considered a part of the role of the Itinerant Hearing Support Teacher, however many of the teachers lack the skills to assist in this crucial time of the parents grief and new role of parenting a Deaf child.

Term of reference

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

Discussion:

The support for children with a disability within a mainstream classroom is inadequate. The child's ability to cope in a wide range of settings is not being addressed. There are no hearing support classes in most country areas. The regular classroom teacher and school has to be inclusive of the hearing impaired student to ensure relevant adjustments and accommodations are put in place. This is not happening. In our experience the majority of classroom teachers do not know how to do this even with advice from itinerant support staff. Itinerant support staff advise teachers and schools of strategies to address issues with acoustics and reverberation within the classroom but the schools do not seem to have the resources to make the suggested adjustments. The inability of the schools to adopt these strategies, then means a hearing impaired child is not on an "equal playing field" with their hearing peers.

The itinerant teacher is the central co-ordinator for these children and classroom teachers are generally pleased for the support and look for more support rather than the scaling back of hours.

There is still a need for intensive individualised quality teaching. If the specialist support is reduced and the child is not supported in the classroom for periods of time, is that child going to have equal access? Is the classroom teacher expected to fill the shoes of the specialists while they are teaching their class, which is likely to have a range of other children who also have individual needs?

The reduction of specialist teacher contact time for children who have great deficits in their speech, language, listening and academic skills whether it be, the sign dependent children or the oral children who still have problems with access creates a situation that is depriving and separating them from their peers. They don't have equal communicative access. This taking away of support could be likened to turning off the lights so you can't see as well, or making a wheel chair dependent person manage with two broken wheels.

It has been suggested that the specialist teachers can be replaced with aide time (integration funds). If there is a very skilled teacher's aide, in some circumstances this may work however in most it simply does not.

In country areas, it is very difficult to find qualified sign interpreters. In fact there are no NAATI level qualified Auslan interpreters/teacher's aides in the Western Region Teacher's aides who can sign often have signed English skills and contact sign not Auslan. There are limited Auslan courses offered, and some areas have none. A sign dependent child using Auslan as his/her first language requires a skilled interpreter, and often one who may also have experience with auditory learning strategies as well if the child is implanted and or accessing a program that requires skills in both areas. Without a fluent, competent language role model, how can a sign dependent student learn a complete language? So again the individual circumstances must be considered and the formula for applying so many hours to a "type" simply cannot work and should not be enforced.

In schools that have a large enrolment of Aboriginal students the incidence of conductive hearing loss (Otitis Media) is high. Local screening data support the research and has found that up to 1 in 3 aboriginal children under 8 years of age suffer from hearing loss as a result of this ear disease. For these children to be engaged and to feel positive about participating at school, they need to be able to hear. Schools could look to providing technologies such as sound enhancement systems. Research has demonstrated that with the use of these systems the impact to all learners is positive. This includes those students with other disabilities, issues or disorders (ADHD, APD - auditory processing disorder). Principals acknowledge the need for the installation of these systems, however find it difficult to fund. Many systems have been installed as a result of fundraising efforts, but it would make a significant difference if schools could be provided with such important equipment as many have been with the provision of smart boards and computers. None of this technology is accessible to the student who has hearing issues as they cannot hear it.

5. The provision of suitable curriculum for intellectually disabled and conduct disordered students

Whilst there may be guidelines in place in some schools and classroom teachers may have attended in-services, the provision of suitable curriculum should occur but in reality this does not happen.

Many classroom teachers do not have a full understanding of what is required when making curriculum adjustments and will rely on the support of the specialised Itinerant Hearing Teacher to make and implement the teaching and learning of the content. Teachers and learning support teams lack knowledge and training of accommodations and adjustments which are mandatory under international law. The NSW Board of Studies also have specific policies that state these requirements.

Many teachers and learning support teams still do not know or are unable to write and implement an individual program for a child with special needs.

At least one school in the Western Region places students *without* identified disabilities on a life skills curriculum. The Board of Studies stresses that the option of a life skills curriculum is a last resort once all other accommodation options have been exhausted.

Students with conductive hearing loss issues have been known to be diagnosed as having an intellectual disability because their test scores in language and verbal areas were low. The fact is these children are hearing impaired, and have speech, language and listening issues as well as the difficulties associated with learning and curriculum access.

Term of reference

6. Student and family access to professional support and services, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and school counsellors

In the country regions we have many children who have cochlear implants. The ongoing therapy these students and families are expected to attend is exhaustive and costly both in terms of finance and time which jeopardises the ability to access which in turn has a large impact on the student's day to day and long term performance and potential at school.

All country students access Australian Hearing for hearing assessments, fittings, hearing aid repairs and relevant assessments. These offices are located in Orange and Dubbo, however many students live many hours from these centres and again incur costs of time and money which often leave the situation of poor fitting, and outdated technology that does not meet their needs. For example a hearing aid that is programmed to suit certain levels may not be adequate if the hearing loss has changed.

School counsellors are available to hearing impaired students however many students require specialist counsellor services. These are available as an outreach service from Sydney and must be booked in advance. Some counsellors do not recognise the skills of the specialist counsellor and hold up referrals for important testing, therapy, diagnosis etc. Speech therapy is an essential service for hearing impaired children in Western Region. There are community health and private Speech pathologists in some areas, but in other areas the service is very limited. In larger areas there are extensive waiting lists. Also, hearing impaired students with intensive speech and language needs, have often been referred to the hearing service. It is important to understand specific and varying therapy needs of hearing impaired students, as they fall beyond the expertise and experience of the local speech pathologists.

Term of reference

7. The provision of adequate teaching training... there are some concerns especially in country areas.

Discussion:

Teachers in country areas are expected to teach babies through to year 12, oral to signing, children with additional disabilities, and to travel anywhere. At times this can be up to 2 hours one way to the first school. This multi tasking and expectation for quality teaching is concerning. There are many issues around OH&S, teacher stress etc that are often simply absorbed by the staff as there are no options available to them.

Whilst re-training programs are offered, the quality of these programs has come into question in recent years. The inquiry must consider such associations as the AATD (Australian Association of Teacher's of the Deaf). This association is about to publish a revised competencies statement for the specialist teachers (hearing). Schools with specialist staff must be expected to use such standards and competencies to ensure the staff employed in these positions have the necessary skills to teach the Deaf / hearing impaired students. The teacher assessment and review format individual schools use must include a provision to assess the specialist teacher's competencies.

Training institutions must ensure the students qualifying are also competent, have had experiences in a range of settings and don't leave the institution with a degree if they don't meet standards. The degree course must offer the opportunity to the trainee to be competent in the wide range of specialist skills required for this diverse role. Currently some institutions have a focus on some areas and not others and the overall degree falls short in providing training to ensure graduates have the required diverse skills.

With regard to ongoing post service training/teacher professional development, many specialist teachers do not have access to quality professional learning due to distance, travel and costs. Currently regions are responsible for organising their own professional learning which has been very worthwhile because we have been able to address regional needs. This has included the use of technologies such as video conferencing. The opportunity to access state level training would be invaluable but exhaustive of any nominated professional learning funds, which some schools do not distribute to specialist teachers as it is absorbed into regular class teacher professional development.

It is very time consuming and expensive for country teachers to attend courses offered in Sydney. Also if they do attend their students are left unsupported as there are no specialist relief teachers to replace them nor funds available to employ them. There is **no** specialised state level provided professional learning. Non DET organisations such as Renwick College and Educators of Deaf Students Association are the only providers of this. There is very little collegiality because regional staff do not get to network with staff from other regions.

In regard to ongoing professional learning and maintaining skills acquired when completing degrees, country teachers wanting to up skill are expected to do so in their own time. This often includes many hours travel. For example the Auslan course currently offered at Dubbo Tafe requires six hours per week commitment at night. The support teachers attending this course teach all day and then attend Tafe. Many of them travel to the Tafe college from out of town, and others who would like to attend may not be able to as they are fulfilling teaching duties in remote areas and stay out in these towns over night. This is the case for one of the Assistant Principals in the region. There is no release in lieu of this time, yet it is an expectation for the staff to attend such professional learning and to be proficient in Auslan if they needed to support a signing student on their caseload.

Term of reference

8. Any other related matters

With a reduction of specialist services (Support Teacher's Hearing or ISTH) the long term implications including the overall cost to the country will be far greater than if appropriate levels were introduced or as in areas that have good services, be at least maintained. This cost must be considered on long term basis. For example issues around employment, and welfare including mental health. The potential of many deaf children is enormous. Specialist support assists with the preparation of these children to be a contributing and functioning part of society. For them to be able to meet their potential these specialist services are crucial, and it must be considered discriminatory not to provide them.

The Assistant Principals Hearing in DET is the highest position of this specialist area. These AP's also teach for 3 days per week with individual students on their caseload. The remaining time is then used to supervise and support the teachers, students, liaise with schools, present professional learning to schools and community groups, attend executive meetings etc. Some of these staff are in remote towns up to 4 hours drive away. For an AP to perform their duties as a teacher first to their students there are often multiple distractions that cause their performance to be less satisfactory. The kids miss out because of the expectations in this role. A review of how and what this role entails would be beneficial. For example many schools with less staff to supervise have senior positions with less teaching commitments and thus more time for management.

The current Senior Education Officer position for the DET has been devolved to be just sensory, (hearing and vision) and so is not a position specifically designated to providing state level support for hearing related education concerns as it was up to 2007. It was felt that when this position was dedicated to the wide ranging and separate sensory disability issues surrounding Deaf Education they were better understood and supported as it was the purpose of the position to meet the issues such as professional learning and best practice.

So, as you see there are numerous issues surrounding the educational services for students with a hearing disability. It is hoped that the inquiry considers all points discussed within this letter and that individual students are considered not a general disability. The level and type of support provided for individuals must meet their needs in order for them to reach their potential.

Yours sincerely

Dubbo & District Parent Support Group for the Hearing Impaired Inc.

Dubbo Itinerant Hearing Support Teachers.