

**INQUIRY INTO TRANSITION SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS
WITH ADDITIONAL OR COMPLEX NEEDS AND THEIR
FAMILIES**

Organisation: Vision Australia

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Standing Committee on Social Issues
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TRANSITIONAL SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH ADDITIONAL OR COMPLEX NEEDS (INQUIRY)

Submission to: Standing Committee on Social Issues
Response Submitted by: Susan Thompson

1 INTRODUCTION

Vision Australia is pleased to have the opportunity to provide comment for the Inquiry into Transition Support for Students with Additional or Complex Needs and Their Families, on behalf of its clients who are blind, have low vision or are deafblind.

In this submission, we:

- highlight a number of issues related to transition;
- deal with specific elements of concern related to the quality of education services to students who are blind or have low vision; and
- address matters related to transition to tertiary education and employment.

We would very much welcome the opportunity to address the Committee to assist Committee members in understanding the unique needs of children who are blind or have low vision.

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1.1 About Vision Australia

Vision Australia is Australia's largest provider of services to people who are blind, have low vision, or are deafblind. It has been formed over the past several years through the merger of several of Australia's oldest, most respected and experienced blindness and low vision agencies. Our vision is that people who are blind or have low vision will increasingly have the choice to participate fully in every facet of life in the community.

To help realise this goal, we are committed to providing high-quality services to the community of people who are blind or have low vision, and their families, in areas that include early childhood, orientation and mobility, employment, information, recreation and independent living. We also work collaboratively with Government, business and the community to eliminate the barriers people who are blind or have low vision face in accessing the community or in exercising their rights as Australian citizens.

1.2 Vision Australia's Interest

Vision Australia's children's services are provided to children and their families from birth to 18 years of age, and our adult services are available to adults throughout their lives.

The children's services include early intervention and physiotherapy (to help ensure that the development of children who are blind or have low vision is keeping pace with their sighted peers), and family support and counselling to help families facing the challenges of navigating through the support systems their child requires.

Our adult services include communications and technology training, tertiary education consultancy, and employment services.

It is important to note, that there are many services, particularly those required through school years, in order for a child who is blind or has low vision to develop into a competent and well adjusted teenager and to become a successful adult.

Further, appropriate advanced flexible planning to assist a child who is blind or has low vision to travel seamlessly from Preschool through primary school, to high school and on to adult life and employment, achieving equitable outcomes in life and employment as their sighted peers.

Vision Australia's children's services specialists repeatedly highlight instances where inequity, poor forward planning, lack of transparency and accountability, as well as lack of collaboration between stakeholders, contributes to poor educational outcomes for students who are blind or have low vision. This in turn has demonstrated negative impacts on employment and life outcomes.

For this reason, Vision Australia is pleased to be able to contribute to this inquiry and to highlight some of these issues which, if addressed, could greatly improve delivery of education services for a group whose disability requires a specialized approach.

While many of the issues addressed in this submission relate to the government school system, they are not unheard of in the Catholic or independent schools.

Further, the underlying principles should apply across all sectors of the education system, which has obligations not only under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN-CRPD) and The Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth.) (the DDA), but should also be accountable to government as a provider of partial funding.

1.3 About this Submission

This submission builds on and should be taken in the context of a range of other submissions made to various government inquiries at both Federal and state levels. These submissions and inquiries cover elements of education and successful transitioning from one stage to another, and we urge the committee to look at the number of related inquiries around the country in recent years.

In particular, Vision Australia made a submission to:

- 'Provision of Education to Students With a Disability or Special Needs' (Inquiry), to General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2, February 2010 (NSW). And
- 'Funding For Schools' (inquiry) to Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (Cth.), March 2011.

This submission is substantially based on the first of these submissions, but in addition, highlights elements which impact on the successful transition and equitable access to all elements of the educational experience for students who are blind or have low vision. I have incorporated much of that material, as it deals with a wide range of issues related to the education of students who are blind or have low vision. Although that inquiry was not specifically focused on transition, without addressing the issues we raise in that document, transition through the school system and on to post school choices, for students with blindness and low vision is a theoretical notion.

2 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This submission raises issues related to the provision of education to children students who are blind or have low vision in New South Wales. The perspectives presented primarily derive from the extensive experience of Vision Australia's Children's Services staff who support more than 1900 school age students and their families attending primary and secondary schools state wide.

The experiences of Vision Australia highlight an overall lack of structure and underfunding of resources in the areas of planning, assessment and delivery of education to students with low vision or blindness. Parents report that Individual Education Planning (IEPs) meetings are often scheduled at short notice, without the presence of interpreters or advocacy support, resulting in minimal participation from the student or parents.

The absence of recognition of the expanded core curriculum model for use in the assessment phase of each student's individual needs has led to an inconsistent approach to forward planning. This has resulted in poor educational outcomes for students who become overly reliant on individual staff at each school - many of whom have minimal or no training in vision related issues.

Insufficient specialised support staff in schools has resulted in teachers at times becoming overwhelmed by the responsibility of having a student with low vision or blindness in their charge. Too often, however, the lack of specialist support is the result of blatant (and at times hostile), opposition on the part of school personnel to accept their moral, legal and policy responsibilities to provide for the equal education of students with disabilities in main stream schools. Vision Australia's Policy and Advocacy service is frequently called upon to assist families who have become extremely frustrated when dealing with the education system in an attempt to gain sufficient appropriate specialist support to achieve quality educational outcomes for their children.

All these issues have a fundamental impact on a student at critical transition points throughout their education. In the absence of these issues being addressed, a student may be left facing life as an adult with a disability ill-equipped to maximise their participation in community life.

Vision Australia recommends an extensive review of the educational system's ability to meet the needs of students who are blind or have low vision. This review should include feedback from all stakeholders; the establishment of a comprehensive assessment tool accessible by all staff; ongoing professional development of staff in vision related issues and legislative responsibilities for the delivery of education to students with disabilities.

3 EQUITABLE EDUCATION

3.1 Legislative Underpinnings

The UN-CRPD, Clause 24 (1), states:

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

Further, the DDA seeks to eliminate, as far as possible, discrimination against people with disabilities. Under section 22 of the DDA, it is unlawful for an educational authority to discriminate against a person on the ground of the person's disability or a disability of any associates of that person.

To this end, Parliament has enacted the Disability Standards for Education 2005 under Section 31 of the DDA, which although perhaps a little non-prescriptive, re-enforces the clear responsibility of education providers under the DDA, not to treat students with disabilities 'less favourably' in the provision of education.

3.2 Special Education Models In Context Of Non-Discrimination Principles

It is important to consider the implications of the terms 'equal opportunity' and 'inclusive education' (UN Convention Clause 24(1) above).

The purpose of education, particularly school education, is to provide grounding in a range of skills which prepare young people academically, physically/developmentally and socially to thrive to the greatest extent possible in society.

It is the responsibility of educational authorities to ensure that there is 'equal opportunity' for students with disabilities (along with their non-disabled peers) to realize these benefits from the education system.

Vision Australia is of the view that the term 'inclusive education' should be interpreted in the broadest possible sense. It should be interpreted in terms of the provision of education being 'inclusive' of all students (including students with disabilities) in the attaining of educational outcomes. It should not necessarily be narrowly interpreted to mean full-time main-streaming 'no matter what' without regard to educational outcomes.

Historically education of students who are blind or have low vision began in special (segregated) schools, and moved quite rapidly in some parts of Australia (and some parts

of the world) to total integration of students into mainstream classes in regular schools, with varying levels and quality of specialist education support.

It is not Vision Australia's intention in this submission to strongly advocate one of those extremes or the other, as there is a body of argument to suggest that both models have their strengths and weaknesses.

In some instances around the country these extremes have seen a range of middle-ground approaches and models. However, in New South Wales it is observed that the educational outcomes for students who are blind or have low vision (in the mainstreaming model) have been patchy at best, for a range of reasons which include both funding and procedural issues.

In short, the system often fails to deliver on equity of opportunity or inclusiveness of students who are blind or have low vision in educational outcomes.

This inequity is reflected in a lack of recognition of fundamental building blocks, (including Braille, Adaptive Technology, and participation in many developmental activities); and a lack of quality planning and thorough outcomes based review at key transition points, as students move through their educational years.

4 INADEQUACY OF DATA

4.1 Numbers Of Students Who Are Blind Or Have Low Vision Across The State

It is disappointingly the case that there is a lack of publicly available data on the numbers of students who are blind, have low vision, are deafblind or have additional disabilities needing specialist support in New South Wales.

Vision Australia's figures show that we currently provide services to around 1914 clients between 4 and 19 years of age who are impacted by the school education system. However there is not readily available data on the numbers of students who are blind or have low vision in government, Catholic and independent schools who have not sought Vision Australia's Children's Services.

Thus it is difficult to make any observations about future planning, due to lack of readily available state-wide data.

Therefore, our observations about educational outcomes are, while based on many years of experience through Vision Australia's Children's Services staff, nevertheless based on observed outcomes of those who have received our services, rather than statistical analysis based on targeted research or data.

Recommendation 1:

That steps be taken in conjunction with state and commonwealth governments, to collect meaningful data on the numbers of students who have disabilities in Australian Schools, broken down by state, specific disabilities and additional disabilities.

Recommendation 2:

That steps be taken in conjunction with state and commonwealth governments, and relevant qualitative research professionals in the disability research field, to collect meaningful data which is made available, on the real life outcomes attained from the education system, by students who have disabilities in New South Wales or Australian Schools, broken down by specific disabilities and additional disabilities.

4.2 Lack Of Data On Performance Of Students With Disabilities

Performance results including the benchmark skills tests such as the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) test are not broken down by disability and are not available as comparative data against the non-disabled student population.

This is compounded by instances of students who are blind or have low vision being discouraged from sitting these tests.

Thus, trends in poor outcomes for particular disabilities cannot be identified in order to address the causal factors and plan remedial action at a systemic level.

Recommendation 3:

That steps be taken to ensure that all students who are blind or have low vision sit for all benchmark tests (with appropriate modifications if necessary) along with all other students.

Recommendation 4:

That data be compiled to provide meaningful information about the performance of students on benchmark tests and be available and broken down by disability group.

5 PLANNING FOR TRANSITION

As with others, education of students who are blind or have low vision, is about sound developmental measures in early childhood, clear learning outcomes with curricular specific pedagogic methods at all levels of formal studies, and enabling information and transitional programs through each stage and for the move into the workforce.

For children who are blind, deafblind or have low vision, planning, adequate flexible funding systems and a whole of education approach are crucial.

Given that 83 percent of learning occurs through vision, it is thus crucial that the education process for a student who is blind or has low vision, incorporates deliberate planning and programs for the personal and life skills in an 'expanded core curriculum, in addition to those elements which will ensure a student can access the academic programs. To provide a student with the skills necessary to enable further education, employment and life choices alongside their sighted peers, these elements must be continuously planned and programmed ahead, and goals set and rigorously reviewed.

5.1 Early Intervention

It is crucial that a consistent and comprehensive system of early intervention services is available to all children who are blind or have low vision, to identify and plan their developmental needs and equip them for transition to school.

In some states and in other parts of the world, the departments of education take responsibility for this process. Queensland is one such example.

While Vision Australia provides early intervention services, it is not able to identify those children who have not requested our services. Vision Australia is of the view that The state government should take responsibility for seeing that children who have disabilities have the benefit of early childhood education services, to begin this process of equipping the children with the educational tools necessary for a transition to school.

Recommendation 5:

That the NSW government commit to developing (through partnerships with all stakeholders) early intervention services for children with disabilities which interface with and prepare children for the school system.

5.2 Funding of Technology

Vision Australia asserts that the current funding arrangements which are region based, do not well serve students blindness and low vision.

Equipment such as CCTVs (TV magnifiers) Braille notetaking/ personal data assistant (PDA) devices, and computers installed with adaptive technology, are, while fairly costly, crucial to the ongoing educational needs of children with blindness and low vision.

The current region and sometimes school based funding arrangements do not account for the movement of a child through educational settings from Pre-school, through primary school, onto high school and to a vocational or post-secondary setting.

Further, they do not make best use of under-utilized equipment which becomes available as students move on through their school years and technology needs change.

If for example, a particular region has more than one student who is blind or has low vision and requires Braille and Braille display technology, a region's budget can be stretched to a point where there are not funds to meet the student's needs. At the same time, a student in another region may have no difficulty having all their technology needs met.

Another issue our staff report, is that when a child moves schools, they are not able to take their adaptive equipment with them. This might be moving schools at transition points, or families moving out of area.

This negatively impacts the seamless movement through the system for the student and can result in needless waste with equipment sitting unutilized.

An example in Canada where special education and technology needs of students with disabilities can be seen is in the organization Special Education Technology British Columbia (SET-BC), www.setbc.org.

This organization is responsible for provision of technology for the for students within the province as a whole, including training. It would seem that such a model provides for much more flexibility and movement of resources to students regardless of the region they are in.

Further, it can more easily cater for changing needs as children transition through the various points of their education.

In the context of recent initiatives to focus disability funding on the individual, Vision Australia asserts that the NSW government should re-assess the funding arrangements to a student focused rather than regional based model.

5.3 Funding For Specialist Support

Given the DDA provides for equity of access to education, including in private/independent schools, families who have children with blindness or vision impairment should have the right to choose to send their child to private/independent schools. Families may be already sending their sighted children to private/independent schools, and naturally enough may prefer their blind or low vision child to attend the same school.

However, the funding support from government for students with disabilities in private/independent schools, is not equal to that available to children in government schools.

This acts as a disincentive for the school to accept these students due to potential costs, and deprives families of children with blindness or low vision the same choices as are available for their sighted children.

Recommendation 6:

That the NSW government reviews funding arrangements to bring them into a 'funding follows the student' approach, thus providing equity of choice for families, easy transition through all stages of education, and more efficient and equitable utilization of resources across regional borders. See also Recommendation 29 in relation to transition to tertiary education.

5.4 Transition Planning and Individual Education Plans

While we discuss elements of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) further in this submission, it is also important to note here that Planning for transition points must be an integral part of that process.

Planning well enough in advance to devote resources, set goals and review outcomes and re-re-evaluate the goals is the only way that a student can transition from point to point.

For example, the introduction of a pre-school child to tactile and Braille learning equips a child with the fundamentals for school; Programs and support to ensure good literacy enables children with blindness or low vision to compete on a more equal academic footing; Early introduction to technology increases the students information access skills prior to highschool; and rigorous training in information technology better equips students for transition to post school education and independent life.

The progressive acquiring of skills must be planned in advance, and assessed against an established set of Expanded Core Curriculum requirements. We discuss the Expanded Core Curriculum later in this submission.

However, Vision Australia staff have reiterated that the issues they continue to be concerned about amongst the school age and post school clients Vision Australia works with which are also address in more detail later in this submission are:

- Poor Social skills;
- Lack of career guidance and accompanying work experience; and
- Parental reluctance to strongly advocate for the needs of their children.

6 EDUCATIONAL FUNDAMENTALS

6.1 Braille

Whether a child is blind or severely vision impaired, on the one hand, or has low vision on the other, they need at the earliest possible age to begin to interact with the world utilizing all their available senses.

For a child whose vision is sufficiently low to indicate the need for Braille, it is vital that very early development of tactile skills are introduced in addition to a very early introduction of Braille. Sighted children are frequently introduced to print well before school, and many enter school with basic reading skills.

Braille is well recognized as being analogous to print as a means for literacy, and it should be introduced to the same or greater degree as a sighted child is introduced to print.

6.2 Visual learning

A child with low vision likewise needs to be introduced to tactile skills, to supplement being assisted to utilize any remaining vision as efficiently as possible, to assist with their learning and development.

There is an argument that children with significantly low vision should also be introduced to Braille particularly if they have potentially deteriorating eye conditions which may indicate a possible loss of vision in later years.

And those people who ultimately are not able to read with the same speed and ease as their sighted peers have shown the benefits of having Proficiency in Braille as an additional information access tool.

6.3 Technology

It is not uncommon for very young children to have access to computers and other technology at very young ages. Given the crucial role technology plays in the education and life of a person who is blind or has low vision, children should be enabled as early as possible to technologies such as:

- Computers and portable notetaking devices with Braille displays;
- Computers with Braille displays or screen access software (screen reading through speech or Braille, and screen magnification software); and
- iPads/iPhones and other devices being utilized by their peers.

Recommendation 7:

That the NSW Government investigates means of providing equipment and associated training to enable students who are blind or have low vision to give them the edge they will need to compete with their peers in play and education and thus development, prior to school.

6.4 Independent Movement and Spatial awareness

Given the crucial part vision plays in developing spatial awareness, as part of its responsibility for early intervention prior to school recommended above, Vision Australia believes it is crucial that orientation and mobility skills are introduced to children as early as possible. This will mean they will be better placed to move into the school environment, and interact with their peers with confidence. This in turn facilitates social interaction, and development of self-esteem.

7 UNIQUENESS OF EDUCATIONAL NEEDS FOR STUDENTS WHO ARE BLIND OR HAVE LOW VISION

As well articulated in “Principles And Standards For The Education Of Children And Youth With Vision Impairments”, November 2004, by South Pacific Educators In Vision Impairment (SPEVI):

Students with vision impairments (including those with multiple disabilities) are infants, toddlers and youth who experience impairments of the eye and visual system that affect their ability to learn. They may be totally blind or they may have visual difficulties in such activities as seeing the print in a textbook, or on a white board, seeing all areas of the typical visual field, or seeing enough detail to interpret the objects in their environment.

Students with vision impairments have unique educational needs. Much of what we generally call “knowledge” is received and processed mainly through the sense of sight,. Children with vision impairments, therefore, need to acquire knowledge in a variety of alternative ways.

Furthermore, this acquisition of knowledge must, in order to equip the student who is blind or has low vision with an equal chance for success in life, be directly addressed in the curriculum by two major elements.

First is the curriculum delivered to sighted students, with the appropriate modifications or support to ensure the same learning outcomes for students who are blind or have low vision.

Second is an 'expanded core curriculum' which is necessary to meet the skills development needs of students who are blind or have low vision which are learned by sighted students largely incidentally as a natural result of daily activities and interactions.

The elements of the expanded core curriculum have been variously articulated by a number of specialists in education for students with vision impairments, since around 1996, and have become an internationally accepted standard.

While the elements of an expanded core curriculum may have been variously expressed, they are expressed by SPEVI as including:

- Compensatory skills, for example, Communication modes
- Orientation and mobility
- Social interaction skills
- Independent living skills
- Recreation and leisure skills
- Career education
- Use of assistive technology
- Visual efficiency skills.

Once a child reaches school age, it is the education system which has one of the biggest impacts on whether a child who is blind or has low vision becomes a successful adult. In addition, the services and educational supports provided to children prior to transition to school is fundamental in the educational process. Both the core academic curriculum and expanded core curriculum to meet the unique needs of very young children and students who are blind or have low vision, delivered in collaboration with school personnel, parents and external specialists, must be a part of the education of students who are blind or have low vision.

Recommendation 8:

That to the extent possible, and as young as possible, assessment processes be developed to assess a student's development in the areas of the expanded core curriculum.

Recommendation 9:

That where a child or student demonstrates or expresses shortfalls in the elements of the expanded core curriculum, these be expressly addressed in the students Individual Education Plan (IEP).

8 EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES FOR ADULTS WHO ARE BLIND OR HAVE LOW VISION

In March 2007, Vision Australia completed research into the employment levels of adults who are blind or have low vision. The full text of the overview of this survey is provided as an appendix to this submission.

In broad terms, the results of this research indicated “63% of the potential labour force with a vision impairment are unemployed”.

While there are clearly many factors which contribute to this situation, Vision Australia believes that in adequately addressing the educational, psychological and social development of young people in a collaborative way with the students, families, teaching staff and other relevant professionals, this situation could be improved for students who are blind or have low vision as they transition to adulthood.

9 ADEQUACY OF TEACHER TRAINING

Vision Australia is concerned as to the level of training and professional development in the area of blindness or low vision, of teachers assigned to these students. This applies both to mainstream classroom teachers expected to include students who are blind or have low vision, as well as for special education teachers whose role it is to provide specialist support to these students.

Presently there are only two institutions remaining nationally which provide specialized courses in the teaching of children with blindness and low vision, with a teacher population of approximately 276,000. This is resulting in a shortage of specialized educators in this area of pedagogy.

The teacher training and professional development opportunities for ‘mainstream’ teachers is also incredibly limited with pre service teachers often only being exposed to one unit of disability related training during their undergraduate degree. The professional development opportunities listed on the NSW Institute of Teaching professional development web site, for ‘in service teachers’ only include 10 courses in disability related teacher training and no specific courses in the area of teaching children with blindness or low vision.

In a survey conducted by the Australian Education Union in 2009, 75% of all teachers surveyed stated that they did not feel equipped with the skills to teach children with diverse learning needs in the classroom.

9.1 Professional Training Of Specialist Teachers In Vision

As noted above, it is of concern to Vision Australia and parents, that there are some Itinerant Support Teachers-Vision (ISTVS) who are assigned to blind students needing literacy through Braille, who themselves are barely ahead of the student in Braille proficiency.

In addition, we are concerned about the level of proficiency of ISTVs in the adaptive technology (both software and hardware) needed by a student who is blind or has low vision to keep pace with the information access demands as they progress through school. We have seen ISTVS and Assistant Principals – Vision (APs) who are steering students in the direction of given technological solutions based on their own knowledge and proficiency rather than the needs of the student.

For special education teachers specializing in teaching students who are blind or have low vision, a good grounding in today's technology for students who are blind or have low vision, (notwithstanding the need for professional development to keep pace with changing technology) should be a requirement.

Again, Vision Australia believes that the Department of Education and Training could influence this by requiring compulsory training in minimum proficiency with a range of technologies as part of special education-vision teacher qualifications.

Recommendation 10:

That special education teachers-vision, teaching students who are blind or have low vision be required to have a **current** Braille proficiency at the grade 2 level and a current minimum level of knowledge of adaptive technology.

9.2 Professional Training And Development Of Classroom Teachers

While certainly teachers providing specialist or individual support to students who are blind or have low vision are important, it is the class room teacher who has primary responsibility for educational outcomes.

9.2.1 Inclusiveness Of Students Who Are Blind Or Have Low Vision

Professional Development of mainstream classroom teachers, particularly in the areas of blindness and low vision, would help ensure that children who are blind or have low vision receive comparable teaching to other children in their class and that teachers interpret the curricula materials in a flexible way with particular regard to the elements of the expanded core curriculum while balancing the wider requirements of the class.

Given that teachers are required to interpret the curriculum, it is essential that they are given the skills to plan classroom activities utilizing universal design.

Vision Australia is aware of examples where during physical education, blind or low vision students have been excluded from activities, which could (particularly in primary school), be made inclusive with some modification to rules, or modification to the students activity, and enabled the child to benefit from the socialization, sense of personal achievement and other benefits of physical education. Without some exposure to the existence of possible solutions and resources available, class teachers are often not always equipped to design inclusive solutions for class students who are blind or have low vision.

Other examples exist where teacher aids or ISTVs are called upon to read material from the board for students, where a basic level of awareness and lateral thinking (through exposure in pre-teacher training or professional development) would have equipped the teacher with more inclusive approaches.

In yet another example, a classroom teacher sat a young totally blind child at a desk on her own, whilst every other child had a desk partner. In another instance the teacher of a young primary class deemed the noise of the Perkins Brailier (used for writing in Braille) to be too noisy, and banished the child to the veranda.

These are clear actions which are not encouraging the integrated socialization of the child or her classmates.

9.2.2 Understanding Of Low Vision

There is a very poor understanding of the range of vision impairment in the community generally, and class teachers are equally not equipped with the necessary understanding.

It is common for people to have difficulty accepting the idea of total blindness and thus to have an understanding of a student's potential capabilities – after any appropriate adjustments to an activity.

Likewise, it is perhaps more difficult to understand that if a child can perform such tasks as reading the blackboard from the front of the class with a magnification aid, why that same child can't participate in a sport requiring tracking of a moving ball.

In addition, for children with low vision, it is difficult to understand the impact of differences in lighting conditions on the way they function with their level of vision.

Vision Australia has seen examples where poor understanding and resulting unrealistic expectations by teachers has led to unjustified disciplining of children. In one such example, a child with some useful vision was being disciplined for an accident which occurred because his low vision meant he was unable to see another child's finger in a cupboard door before closing it.

At the other extreme, children who are totally blind are excluded from sport and other

recreational activities, and sidelined from their peers.

For children who are blind or have low vision, they may not have fully developed an understanding of how they are different to those who are sighted, and may not yet have the self-advocacy skills or understanding, to convey to a sighted adult how this impacts them in a given setting, such as in different lighting environments in classrooms, in the playground or on a sports field.

It can also be difficult for sighted peers to understand blindness and the variability of low vision. This, particularly in the teenage years, leads to teasing, and often rejection of a young person with a vision impairment. For some children and teenagers, this can lead to long-term negative impacts on their self-esteem.

This has been evident in many instances where children transitioning to high school and on to post-school life, are in denial of their low vision and thus, through inability to self-advocate, are not able to exercise rights of equity.

For all these reasons, a classroom teacher of a student who is blind or has low vision needs to be provided with a good grounding in the practical implications of both in a variety of situations. In addition, they need to be provided with mechanisms for ongoing professional peer support with other teachers with this practical understanding.

Recommendation 11:

That classroom teachers in their pre-undergraduate training be given an introductory understanding of issues to consider with a student who is blind or has low vision in their class including:

- Understanding of the expanded core curriculum in inclusive teaching;
- Inclusive ways of presenting visual material, or to redesign the presentation of the content;
- Adaptive ways of conducting physical or manual activities to include the student who is blind or has low vision;
- Strategies for encouraging social interaction between the student who is blind or has low vision and classmates where isolation is observed;
- An understanding of the potential for a blind student if developing properly;
- An understanding of the wide variability and situational impact of low vision;
- The potential difference blindness versus low vision makes in considering inclusive classes;
- The role of the ISTV;
- Knowledge of accessing other professionals in blindness or low vision;

Recommendation 12:

That, in the event of a teacher being assigned a student who is blind or has low vision, professional development be required to more thoroughly cover the elements in Recommendation 11 above.

9.3 Training In Developing Individual Education Plans (IEPs)

Teachers charged with the responsibility of constructing IEPs, also require specific training in this area. This training should include:

- An understanding of the rights and responsibilities of all stakeholders in the IEP process;
- An understanding of the importance of adaptation of the core curriculum;
- The elements of the expanded core curriculum and options for assessing progress;
- How to plan progressively for transitional needs; and
- The importance of seeking the assistance of specialists where required; and

This would help ensure that the IEP is formulated and reviewed in a periodic, innovative, collegiate and systematic way.

Recommendation 13:

Teachers involved in formulating and revising Individual Education Plans, should have training to ensure the IEP is an effective tool for the student who is blind or has low vision. Elements should include:

- An understanding of the rights and responsibilities of all stakeholders in the IEP process;
- An understanding of the importance of adaptation of the core curriculum;
- The elements of the expanded core curriculum and options for assessing progress; and
- How to plan progressively for transitional needs; and
- The importance of seeking the assistance of specialists where required;

10 POOR LITERACY OUTCOMES

Vision Australia Children's Services staff have observed that children who are blind or have low vision have much lower levels of literacy than that of their sighted peers.

10.1 Literacy Through Braille

There are disturbing trends currently apparent in the education of students who are blind or have low vision in relation to providing literacy through Braille.

We are aware of situations where Braille is taught for only a limited number of hours a week (possibly dependent on the visiting schedule of ISTVs. Whereas sighted children are

constantly immersed in reading and writing. Children who are blind are therefore not being exposed to the same continuum of literacy skills development.

Further, as noted in point 7.1 above, there are teachers assigned to providing support to children who are blind or have low vision who are neither specialized in blindness and low vision, nor competent in Braille. This suggests a lack of recognition of the importance of Braille as a key to literacy both for blind students and those whose vision is too low to efficiently read print.

There is research, such as that conducted by The Centre for Non-invasive Brain Stimulation in Boston Massachusetts, suggesting that for a blind person, the area of the brain utilized in processing visual information including print, is utilized in the process of reading and processing Braille. Further, these parts of the brain are not involved in processing auditory information.

Thus, Braille is the closest equivalent to reading print.

Further, arbitrary decisions are being made not to teach a child Braille, despite the possibility, if not the likelihood, of their eye condition leading to further loss of vision. Such examples would include Glaucoma, Retinitis Pigmentosa and Ushers Syndrome (where an existing hearing impairment is followed by later vision loss).

Other concerning aspects about the teaching of Braille are instances where decisions about whether to teach a student Braille are again not being made based on need, but rather on the availability of competent teachers.

While there are clearly resource implications, perhaps a more needs based approach to where teachers with needed Braille related skills are placed is warranted.

Given that Braille is the key to literacy for those students who are blind or have significantly low vision who are able to learn it, it must not be relegated to a 'nice to have' in a student's education.

As with all students, poor literacy has a profound impact on a student's transition from school to employment and life.

Recommendation 14:

That in conjunction with all stakeholders, a review of the Individual Education Plan development processes is conducted to ensure that the long term prognosis of the child's vision condition is taken into account, to avoid inappropriate decisions against teaching Braille and thus condemning a child to poor or no literacy.

Recommendation 15:

That resources be appropriately prioritized to ensure that a child becomes thoroughly literate using Braille along with their peers as early as possible.

10.2 Benchmark Skills Tests

10.2.1 Exclusion Of Students Who Are Blind Or Have Low Vision From Benchmark Skills Tests

Another contributing factor in the observed low levels of literacy amongst children who are blind or have low vision is that they are all-too-often excluded from the regular benchmark skills tests such as the NAPLAN test.

It is our understanding that for a child not to sit these benchmark tests, the schools must have parents' permission. Yet we see instances where schools have decided there is no need for a student who is blind or has low vision to sit the tests for such reasons as:

- It will be too hard for them; or
- It will be demoralizing.

Often the school has effectively decided not to have a student sit the testing and the parent is simply advised.

In addition to this being inequitable for the student, it is usurping parental rights.

Thus, these children are not being regularly assessed for literacy and numeracy, in order to institute remedial programs. Further, data is not being collected about where resources need to be allocated to assist students, or which schools are showing better competency skills for students who are blind or have low vision.

This continuation of poor literacy and numeracy ultimately has implications for employment. It also negatively impacts on self-esteem, and leads to further alienation from peers who are at higher levels of competency.

10.2.2 Value Of Benchmark Skills Tests

We have seen instances where ISTVs when asked about the results of a student's NAPLAN test were unaware of the information.

This kind of lack of monitoring of students' progress is very concerning, as they should be used to inform the ISTV as to where they may need to provide more intensive support; to inform the revision of the IEP, and likewise inform decisions to address literacy deficiencies which need addressing by such means as a literacy plan to prevent a student moving through transition points with these deficiencies not addressed.

Further, we recently saw a year 11 totally blind student exhibiting poor levels of comprehension whose parents had been strenuously attempting without success, to have this addressed with teachers (including the ISTV) and through the IEP process.

It transpired that the student had not sat the year 9 NAPLAN test, and consequently did not have the option of a literacy plan, and the funds for additional support to implement a literacy plan.

In yet another example, a year 9 student with low vision was deemed by teachers (including the ISTV) as bright, and doing well, without the information from NAPLAN tests. When asked to examine the results of the NAPLAN test, the student showed as having poor literacy.

The poor literacy was influenced to some degree by issues of the student's acceptance of low vision and the need to use adaptive technology and adaptive approaches. Nevertheless, a deliberate effort to look at test results and implications (including strategies for improving literacy and academic performance) should have been made.

10.2.3 Accessibility Of Benchmark Skills Tests

While the tests are available in a range of formats, such as large print and Braille, often the content of the test without modification, results in the format/presentation of the test not suiting the content of the test.

For example, a test provided in large print, by photocopy enlarging (in black and white), does not give the student access to questions referring to the colours in a picture.

We have also had recent examples where a secondary student was not permitted to sit the test using a computer equipped with screen reading software. This is not reasonable in the case of a student who is not a Braille user.

Likewise, Braille tests papers without modification can be inequitable for a Blind student.

While we are aware that exam modification is an evolving process, these instances of the tests not taking account of the format and the students access needs are nevertheless alarming.

11 LOW EXPECTATIONS OF CHILDREN WHO ARE BLIND OR HAVE LOW VISION

It is not uncommon, that students who are blind or have low vision are subject to lower expectations in relation to academic performance and required home work than that expected of their sighted peers.

Provided that these children have the necessary support services, equipment and reasonable adjustments to place them on an equal academic plane with their peers, they should be subject to the same standards and expectations from both parents and

teachers.

Clearly, any child is unique in their response to the pressure of expectation and the challenge of achieving and competing academically; and in some cases needs a more delicate approach from parents and teachers or remedial attention. The same applies to children who are blind or have low vision. However, to subject any child to lower standards and expectations, based purely on their level of vision, is a gross disservice to them.

It should be noted however, that care is warranted to ensure that teachers and parents do not over-compensate, and consequently expect unreasonably more of a child than is expected of sighted peers. This can have equally damaging results to the development of self-esteem, if the child is incapable of meeting the greater than normal expectations.

Nevertheless, Vision Australia, in its work with families and children who are blind or have low vision, sees repeated examples of unrealistically high marks in class work, poor expectations by teachers, and unrealistic assessment of a student's potential and current competency due to lack of benchmark test results.

Vision Australia has seen dismaying examples of students who either leave school with very poor skills believing they will go to university, or students without an additional intellectual disability, who because of poor academic/literacy skills not having been addressed are directed into transition-to-work programs alongside students with intellectual disabilities.

11.1 Unrealistic Progress Feedback Leading To Unrealistic Expectations

Vision Australia staff have noted instances of children being set up to fail long term by not being provided with realistic feedback through their education years.

We have seen instances of children being awarded high marks for what appears to be very poor work. One staff member noted a student who was granted 18/20 for work which showed very poor literacy.

In particular, we see students in middle and late high school with kindergarten level literacy having apparently been allowed to believe they will enter university.

This serves a student very poorly in transitioning to post school education where they may be confronted by their previously unacknowledged poor educational outcomes.

11.2 Poor Planning And Expectations For The Future

At the other extreme, sadly we have seen instances where students were deemed by

teaching staff as appropriate only for a transition-to-work program; and other options effectively not kept open. In one such instance, had there been appropriate attention given to literacy and academic progress, through the benchmark testing, the IEP process, and the implementation of appropriate remedial measures, the outcome could have been quite different for a student who was not intellectually disabled however ended up in a transition-to-work program.

In essence, it can only be assumed that children are being let down at a number of points:

- Firstly, failure to administer the basic skills assessments, and thus implement appropriate remedial action to address poor literacy;
- Secondly, in the review of the IEP process where children and parents along with educators should be reviewing the child's competence in academic and other life skills; and
- Thirdly, the lack of appropriate career advice to meet the needs of people who are blind or have low vision, and specifically based on their potential and demonstrated performance after appropriate supports are implemented.

Vision Australia's employment survey confirms the lack of appropriate career advice in that "35% of survey respondents aged under 25 years indicated that they did not receive career guidance at schools appropriate to their level of vision impairment".

It needs to be understood that sighted students learn incidentally about a vast range of careers and what they entail, by seeing the world around them; by having a range of opportunities to participate in working through high school years, and by ready access to printed information.

Recommendation 16:

That as part of the Individual Education Plan, as early as possible in the primary school years, children begin to receive career guidance at schools, appropriate to their age, and level of vision impairment.

Recommendation 17:

That in conjunction with relevant professionals, a range of programs be instituted or accessed, to facilitate the exploration of, and preparation for progress to further education and employment for students who are blind or have low vision.

While it is pleasing to note, that there are programs and options for students to combine vocational study at TAFE, our staff have noted that lack of clarity in funding sources for adaptive technology are a barrier to students completing work at home.

11.3 Influence Of Role Models And Peer Support On Post School Expectations

It is not uncommon, where children are in over-protective families, for them to grow up with poor domestic skills; low academic performance; no expectations of further education or a job; and no plan for independent living away from home.

This is possibly due to a lack of blind or low vision adult role models for children, teachers and families which could serve to raise expectations.

An unfortunate consequence of the move from specialist school to mainstream school education has been less opportunity for the kind of peer support which aids in children mixing with others who are peers or older role models. This peer support serves to raise the general level of expectation by fostering a genuine sense of equality and healthy competition with peers who are blind or have low vision. Contact with older role models who are blind or have low vision serves to foster positive aspiration.

Recommendation 18:

That more opportunities be available as part of school activities, after school programs, and during school breaks for children who are blind or have low vision to network, form binding friendships, gain confidence by participation in recreational activities on an equal bases, and learn a range of life skills with peers and adult role models who are blind or have low vision.

12 ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY AS REQUIRED

Vision Australia's employment survey highlighted the following:

There is a heavier concentration of employment for people who are blind or have low vision in non-manual or non-labour positions. Therefore, the need for this group to be computer-literate and/or to possess other technical skills is elevated. Further, it is clear that the higher the level of education possessed by a person who is blind or has low vision, the more likely they will be employed. Similarly, the more formats of material they can access, the higher their employment opportunities.

Schools should ensure computer and technology skills and other information access skills, are taught to students who are blind or have low vision, to meet their future career needs, and current educational access needs.

12.1 Technology Training

Vision Australia offers training in accessing alternative formats, in using computers with appropriate technologies and in using other adaptive equipment. Vision Australia already works with schools and other educational bodies to provide specialist knowledge where requested.

As noted earlier, ISTVs need to have at least a minimum level of training in assistive technology, in order to assist the student to develop the skills in using the technology provided.

12.2 Provision Of Appropriate And Current Adaptive Technology

In order to equip students with the necessary technology and adaptive technology skills as early as possible, there is a need to address the inconsistency and lack of access to necessary assistive technology and equipment, across Australia and within states.

It is unacceptable that children are being expected to work with equipment, such as Perkins Braille machines, which are more than fifty years out of date when there are more current technologies (such as the Mountbatten Braille machine) which promote Braille literacy development, and add additional functionality beneficial to a student in a mainstream class.

Further, as noted above, Vision Australia is aware of instances of young primary school students having been excluded from classrooms (sent out on the veranda) due to the noise of their Braille equipment. This, in addition to being demoralizing for a child, is unwarranted.

As a student progresses through school, the technology should be keeping pace with their needs, the technological progress of the curriculum and with current demands for technology skills.

Vision Australia staff noted that young children are increasingly using netbook computers as early as 4 or 5 often for school related activities, whereas a child who is blind or has low vision does not have access to this technology with adaptive software and hardware for access, and is thus often behind their peers from a very early age.

Further, when a blind or low vision student reaches high school and has attained Braille or print literacy, the adaptive equipment such as Braille computerized notetakers, laptops with screen reading or magnification software, needs to be provided to cater for the higher volume of material to be accessed, and the way information is accessed.

A student who does not have access to a BrailleNote, a Pacmate, or a notebook sized

computer with a screen reader or magnification software, and can't access the internet, is neither able to attain current technology skills, or keep up with the demands of information access required in today's schools.

Recommendation 19:

That in conjunction with state, territory and the commonwealth, a national equipment scheme (along the lines of the Workplace Modifications Scheme) be established, which streamlines assessment and supply of equipment to students at a national level; and ensures timely provision of up-to-date and educationally appropriate equipment.

12.3 Training On Current Adaptive Technology

Sadly, in some instances an ISTV's decision as to whether a student is taught to use current adaptive technology appropriate for their access needs (particularly when nearing or having commenced high school), is made on factors other than the needs of the student. These factors have included:

- Whether there is a Laptop with screen reading or magnification software available;
- The AP's decision about their access needs, sometimes based on their limited knowledge of the options and often without a professional assessment of the student's functionality with given adaptive technology solutions; and
- Whether the AP has the skills to teach particular software or hardware.

Further, this is a situation often not consistent from region to region.

12.4 'Computers In Schools' Roll-Out

In the year 9 roll-out of computers in schools, while there are instances of students who are blind or have low vision being able to access this program, there has an apparent lack of flexibility in its implementation, where students were not always being provided with the computer which best met their needs without advocacy of Vision Australia Staff. For a low vision student needing magnification, a larger laptop, rather than a standard issue netbook was needed to be suitable for magnification software.

In some instances, there has also been a lack of recognition of the need to provide additional adaptive software such as screen reading or magnification software.

While some of these issues are currently being addressed, at a systemic level the needs of students who are blind or have low vision should have been considered at the outset.

12.5 Inflexibility of schools to adapt to the technological opportunities

In a recent joint project with the Catholic Education system, Vision Australia acted as a consultant in the development of a solution whereby primary school students with low vision have had access to classroom activities through the use of smartboard technology and iPads.

It has also been noted by our staff, that this would be far more difficult to achieve in a government school, to too rigid policies around installing additional software on student computers and access to school networks.

Recommendation 20:

The NSW Department in conjunction with Vision Australia, investigate (and review policy where necessary) to enable greater educational outcomes for students who are blind and have low vision, in line with immerging technologies.

13 EXCLUSION OF CHILDREN WHO ARE BLIND OR HAVE LOW VISION FROM SPORT, SCHOOL EXCURSIONS AND OTHER ACTIVITIES

Vision Australia staff are aware of children who have experienced exclusion from excursions and other school activities based on their blindness or low vision. This is doing these children a disservice and increases their sense of isolation from their peers.

This exclusion may be due to a misconception, either from school staff or parents, that the child is unable to participate in an activity due to their blindness or low vision. It may also be due to the child being scheduled for additional programs such as Orientation and Mobility training in those time slots.

13.1 Physical Education

Vision Australia is aware of good examples where students are given opportunities to participate with sighted classmates in physical education lessons and activities, utilizing adaptive equipment, slightly modified rules, and inclusive games such as Goalball.

Conversely, we are also aware of instances where individual schools (contrary to departmental policy) won't permit blind or low vision students in the area where physical education is taking place – citing safety as the reason.

However, given the critical role of physical activity on such things as motor skills development and fitness; the sense of wellbeing and achievement; and the sense of team work and social participation, it is not acceptable that a child who is blind or has low vision

be deprived of the benefits of sport or physical activity.

There is research to suggest that a child who is blind or has low vision if able to fully participate in physical activity can develop with gross motor skills matching their sighted peers.

Although there are instances where a blind or low vision student may need some one-on-one assistance to learn some skills in physical education, often the student may simply need the opportunity (with the appropriate adaptive equipment) to explore the equipment in a tactile way; and join in with their classmates and develop the team-building skills along with the motor skills.

We are aware of some instances where schools (to their credit) have purchased adaptive equipment, and yet it is not always utilized.

There are also some positive examples where schools have practiced exemplary inclusiveness in physical education.

In one example, the hockey game rules were modified requiring that everyone had to touch the ball before a goal would count. This provided that all students including the low vision student played by the same rules and the low vision student had the sense of participation, being relied upon as a crucial part of a team and the sense of achievement.

In another example the teacher employed a larger ball and bat for all, which enabled the low vision student to participate alongside her peers.

On the other hand we are aware of instances where the students were practicing ball skills, and the low vision student was taken aside with an adapted ball by her ISTV when this ball could have been used by all students (including the low vision student) to practice ball skills together.

Recommendation 21:

That in instances where a sporting activity is genuinely not accessible to a child, other parallel programs are provided for example organizing activities such as Goalball in which sighted peers can also participate.

13.2 School Excursions

School excursions also provide opportunities for extending experience of the world beyond school, and can provide opportunities for socialization equally important for children who are blind or have low vision. It is unacceptable that a child be excluded from these excursions based purely on their blindness or low vision.

Recommendation 22:

That an Education Department process be developed, to address instances of individual schools who exclude children who are blind or have low vision from

sporting and physical activities or school excursions and other activities except in the most extenuating circumstances. Further, where additional programs specific to a child's blindness or low vision are conducted, that resources be made available to enable these to occur at times which do not conflict with other activities beneficial to the child's physical or social education.

14 THE PROVISION OF A SUITABLE CURRICULUM FOR INTELLECTUALLY DISABLED AND CONDUCT DISORDERED STUDENTS.

We have seen at least one instance where a student who is blind, has poor literacy and a mild intellectual disability (IM) has been simply given a modified version of regular subjects in the main stream curriculum.

It would have perhaps been more appropriate in that instance to provide the student with a life skills curriculum available to IM students, where there would have been more opportunity for the student to concentrate on life needs skills appropriate to his blindness combined with his intellectual disability, including addressing his poor literacy.

This raises a concern that students with blindness and low vision in addition to other disabilities are not well served, and underscores the low value given to literacy with Braille. Further, a well conducted IEP process may have been able to plan better for this student's needs.

15 STUDENT AND FAMILY ACCESS TO PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT AND SERVICES

Vision Australia does, when requested and permitted, work with children and teachers in schools to provide intervention, advice, or training to students and teachers where warranted.

This might be advice from physical or occupational therapist to assist a student to gain the developmental benefits from participation in physical education. Other professionals can provide additional training in adaptive technology such as screen Reading or screen magnification software; or use in Braille notetaking devices.

Guide Dogs NSW/ACT also provides Orientation and Mobility Instruction in a number of instances.

However, in our experience, in practice, the freedom for schools to utilize external services to support the student are at best inconsistent. Often when external specialists are invited at the level of the ISTV and school principal, the permission for external specialists to work with the student is blocked by the AP-Vision, who is often not able to give a rational explanation for doing so.

This has occurred in some instances where a student urgently needed training in adaptive technology beyond the skills of the ISTV and needed the technology skills to support the demands of their higher level education.

This mystifying and very concerning reluctance is certainly not in the best interests of the student.

16 INSUFFICIENT SPECIALISED SUPPORT

Vision Australia is aware of many examples where children are struggling in schools due to insufficient specialist support.

This is due in some instances to insufficient hours being provided to assist the child or the teacher where a child needs more ongoing intensive support. In some instances it is a lack of understanding by teachers that a child's difficulties are due to a vision impairment. In some instances it is due to a lack of self-advocacy on the part of a student who just wants to "fit in" invisibly, or a lack of advocacy support for parents.

In the case of students with dual hearing and vision impairments, there is a lack of acceptance within the education system that the communication and education challenges presented by both disabilities often need addressing by a combination of separate specialists.

In still other cases, the lack of specialist support is a result of blatant, sometimes hostile, opposition on the part of school personnel to accept their moral, legal and policy responsibility for the equal education of students with disabilities in main stream schools.

Vision Australia's Policy and Advocacy service is often called upon to assist families who are extremely frustrated with dealing with the education system to gain sufficient appropriate specialist support to achieve quality educational outcomes for their children, which is a basic right in our society.

17 INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION PLAN (IEP) PROCESS

Vision Australia has some real concerns with the conduct of the IEP process, in either planning the special education needs of students who are blind or have low vision, or enabling parents to feel empowered at influencing their child's educational needs.

While it is difficult in writing to convey the despair and frustration of parents with the IEP process, the below examples may serve to give some insight.

17.1 The Attendance Of Parent Advocates

As mentioned earlier, despite agreement at a high level in the Department of Education and Training, for parents to enlist advocacy support from organizations such as Vision Australia for IEP meetings, in reality this is often resented at the school, ISTV or AP level

It appears that one difficulty is that the term applied to someone attending an IEP meeting to advocate for the parents is 'support person' rather than 'advocate'.

In some instances the parents are told their role is only to provide support, not to advocate. In some instances only a short time is allowed for a meeting and thus neither the advocate nor the parents have much of an opportunity to raise their concerns or ideas. In other instances the ISTV has challenged the role of the advocate who was requested by the parents.

Recommendation 23:

That the Department of Education and Training and external agencies who could contribute to the IEP process reach an agreed position as to the legitimate role of an external advocate, and that this is conveyed to all stakeholders in the IEP process.

17.2 Need For Interpreters

We are aware of instances where parents of a child who is blind or has low vision and from a non-English speaking background, were not provided with an interpreter to ensure that they have a thorough understanding of the discussion and decisions coming out of the meeting and thus an informed role in their child's education planning.

For many parents the IEP process is stressful and disempowering, and to not recognize the language barrier can only add to the difficulties.

Recommendation 24:

That when the parent of a child with a disability is from a non-English speaking background they be offered an interpreter for equal participation in the IEP process.

17.3 Scheduling And Participation In IEP Meetings

Often IEP meetings are called at very short notice for parents and if they are not available, the meetings frequently go ahead without the parents.

Often the meetings are structured in such a way as to either deal with matters not necessary for an IEP meeting such as the need for tactile Geography maps, or to provide very little time for the parents' contribution.

In still other instances where a high school student is involved the IEP meetings confer a parental role upon the student to participate in the meeting. This is intimidating for the student, and dismissive of the rights and role of parents in the process.

Recommendation 25:

That a review of the Individual Education Plan process be undertaken with the involvement of parents, and external specialist who have a legitimate interest - in a separate forum from teaching staff (to provide a non-threatening environment).

That this review be for such purposes as:

- Enabling a full examination of its strengths and weaknesses;
- Revising where necessary, the policy in light of the information gathered; and
- To establish readily accessible review and complaints mechanisms for parents and advocates to seek remedy when the process fails.

18 FUNDING ISSUES

18.1 Special Education Places

Notwithstanding the difficulties with special education support discussed above, Vision Australia is not aware that a student who is blind or has low vision has been denied a place in the public school system.

However we are aware of individual schools attempting to avoid their obligations by trying to persuade parents to choose another school for their child.

18.2 Regional Inequities

It is observed that due to such factors as large distances, and shortages of qualified teachers in regional areas, students who are blind or have low vision can be less well supported than students in larger centres.

Examples of this include:

- the promotion of teacher aids to ISTV roles with 'learn as they go' training including Braille;
- ISTVS being considerable distances from the nearest AP-Vision, or others who can provide support; and
- Teaching staff and thus students not having ready access to external specialist support (including physiotherapy, occupational therapy, orientation and mobility, adaptive technology and low vision assessment).

Recommendation 26:

That any funding formula incorporate funding for regional education, to provide external specialist services (including travel expenses) for a student who is blind or has low vision.

18.3 Lack Of Choice Between Government And Non-Government Schools

Further to comments made in section 5.3 above, for parents in regional New South Wales, where resources (particularly the availability of special education teachers with vision related expertise) are spread more thinly, often their only choice for the education of their child, who is blind or has low vision, is the public system. This is due to the unlikelihood of specialist support through the Catholic or independent school systems.

Given this, perhaps there is room for consideration of the allocating of the estimated cost of supporting a child who is blind or has low vision (both with teaching specialist and adaptive equipment and software) to support that child in a non-government school.

Recommendation 27:

That consideration be given to a funding formula for students who are blind or have low vision in regional areas (without ready availability of government sector ISTV resources) to allocate the estimated cost of supporting a child who is blind or has low vision (both with teaching specialist and adaptive equipment and software) to support that child in a non-government school.

18.4 Funding Models

Around Australia, there is a range of models from funding the student's support needs at a student level, to funding the special education support system as a program.

It is difficult to predict whether any particular model would better address the funding related aspects of the issues raised above any better than another.

The potential difficulties of a school region having students with greater need for funds than another on an equal budget, might be addressed by a student based funding model. However, this requires safeguards to ensure the funds are sought for on the basis of the student's needs, and spent on that student rather than appropriated for other school needs with little benefit for the special needs of that student.

Whereas a program based model can allow flexibility to move funds around, but the current system of budgets devolving to the AP level can mean that one student's needs may be better covered than another. This is influenced by the knowledge and degree of advocating for the student's needs.

As noted above, one of the essential problems in the current funding model is the degree to which the system is reliant on all personnel from the ISTV to the school principal to the AP, to be advocating for the real needs of a student, in the application for funding. If the process falls down at any of those points, it can be to the detriment of the student's special education needs.

18.5 Funding The Student's Disability Or Functioning Capacity

For a student who is blind or has low vision, the answer to this question is some of both.

Teachers who obtain a Masters in Special Education – Vision, (at one of the two remaining institutions providing vision related qualifications) are in theory equipped to deal with a student with the range of vision impairment from total blindness to low vision impacting on their learning.

A student who requires Braille needs to be provided with a teacher with competency in Braille, whereas a student in that range with a high level of vision needs may only require enlargement of material and assistance with learning to maximize that low vision.

Regardless, the student should be allocated a teacher with the relevant skills for the students learning needs.

Thus in this instance the allocation of funds in terms of human resources must at least address the vision related disability and the teacher resources must be planned accordingly.

If however, that student has or acquires an additional compounding disability during their school years, the additional disability must be addressed in conjunction with the student's blindness or low vision.

An example of this is a student with Ushers Syndrome who initially has low vision but who later begins to lose their hearing. In addition to using Braille, this student needs to be taught in the appropriate sign language and other learning needs by a qualified teacher

with qualifications in teaching students who are deaf or hearing impaired in conjunction with the support to the existing blindness or low vision needs.

18.6 Transparency Of Rights And Funding

A further difficulty is a wide spread lack of knowledge by families about the rights, and funding criteria for the special education needs of their children, and how they can best advocate for those rights.

Thus there needs to be more readily accessible information for families from the Department of Education to assist their advocacy for their child.

19 REVIEW AND MONITORING OF POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

It was apparent from the feedback that we received through consultation with staff, that despite the policies and procedures the Department of Education and Training has in place to facilitate equitable education for students who are blind or have low vision, there are a number of instances where the policies and procedures have not been effective. There is also an apparent lack of knowledge by families of the mechanisms available to them to address concerns, and how to access such mechanisms.

Recommendation 28:

That the Department of Education and training review relevant processes, with the view to improving the monitoring and compliance with policies and procedures related to provision of special education to students with disabilities, including the family friendliness of complaints mechanisms.

20 TRANSITION TO TERTIARY STUDY AND EMPLOYMENT

Fundamental to understanding the transition to tertiary study for a student with a vision impairment is understanding the difference in support and how it is provided at tertiary institutions as opposed to secondary or primary schools.

The NSW Education Department provides adaptive technology for primary and secondary students but this is taken away from the student at the completion of secondary education.

In tertiary institutions adaptive technology is often provided on campus only and usually only minimally (in a small adaptive technology room or on a couple of computers).

Although many universities provide more than the bare minimum of adaptive technology, it

is still only provided on campus only. Also the tertiary student with a vision impairment is expected to request support rather than it being offered (as it would have been throughout primary and secondary education). Also the tertiary student is expected to do far more study at home and to access far more and more complex reading matter than in earlier study.

Recommendation 29:

That the NSW Education Department does not request that adaptive technology be returned at the completion of secondary education.

As students with vision impairments require assistive technology to access readings and also to write assignments, it is important that they have this available to them in their preferred format and whenever needed. This often means that they are best served by having a laptop with either screen magnification software or screen reading software (or both) which they can take to classes and take home. It is also important that reading material is made available to them in not only an accessible and useable format but in a timely manner (this is often not the case and the student receives readings months later than other students and sometimes are never provided with anything in their preferred format).

Recommendation 30:

Education providers and publishers need to be more aware of their legal obligation to provide reading materials in alternative formats.

Recommendation 31:

That more pressure be placed on Education providers to provide details of alternative format produced texts to the CAL Masters database.

Just as there are many different types of vision impairment, they can occur at different times of life and to varying degrees of severity. Each person with a vision impairment will also have various ways and means of adapting to their condition and utilising assistive technology. This means that it is important to tailor supports to the individual.

It is essential that education skills be ingrained at an early age in all students. A child with a severe vision impairment is best served by being provided with expertise in Braille as it is the best means for these children to learn spelling and grammar (and also music and mathematics). Braille needs to be understood as a language in itself. It is a shame that Braille reading materials are not provided more extensively for these students throughout their education.

The time of transition to tertiary study is also often a complex and significant time in the life of students as they are expected to be adults and more independent. If adequate supports are not provided for them, then this will have follow on effects in terms of confidence, completion of qualifications and transition to employment.

21 CONCLUSION

Vision Australia is hopeful that this inquiry will lead to improvements in the educational outcomes for students who are blind or have low vision in New South Wales and that the successful transition of students who are blind or have low vision from early childhood, through school and on to post-secondary education, employment and life, increasingly reflects equity in access to educational programs.

Vision Australia is mindful that some of our recommendations above may be viewed as having already been implemented. However, as highlighted throughout this submission, in practice, for our clients and their families, many of the existing policies and processes are not effective.

We would be more than happy to provide further information to the committee on any of the recommendations or comments made in this submission.

22 SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1:

That steps be taken in conjunction with state and commonwealth governments, to collect meaningful data on the numbers of students who have disabilities in Australian Schools, broken down by state, specific disabilities and additional disabilities.

Recommendation 2:

That steps be taken in conjunction with state and commonwealth governments, and relevant qualitative research professionals in the disability research field, to collect meaningful data which is made available, on the real life outcomes attained from the education system, by students who have disabilities in New South Wales or Australian Schools, broken down by specific disabilities and additional disabilities.

Recommendation 3:

That steps be taken to ensure that all students who are blind or have low vision sit for all benchmark tests (with appropriate modifications if necessary) along with all other students.

Recommendation 4:

That data be compiled to provide meaningful information about the performance of students on benchmark tests and be available and broken down by disability group.

Recommendation 5:

That the NSW government commit to developing (through partnerships with all stakeholders) early intervention services for children with disabilities which interface with and prepare children for the school system.

Recommendation 6:

That the NSW government reviews funding arrangements to bring them into a 'funding follows the student' approach, thus providing equity of choice for families, easy transition through all stages of education, and more efficient and equitable utilization of resources across regional borders. See also Recommendation 29 in relation to transition to tertiary education.

Recommendation 7:

That the NSW Government investigates means of providing equipment and associated training to enable students who are blind or have low vision to give them the edge they will need to compete with their peers in play and education and thus development, prior to school.

Recommendation 8:

That to the extent possible, and as young as possible, assessment processes be developed to assess a student's development in the areas of the expanded core curriculum.

Recommendation 9:

That where a child or student demonstrates or expresses shortfalls in the elements of the expanded core curriculum, these be expressly addressed in the students Individual Education Plan (IEP).

Recommendation 10:

That special education teachers-vision, teaching students who are blind or have low vision be required to have a **current** Braille proficiency at the grade 2 level and a current minimum level of knowledge of adaptive technology.

Recommendation 11:

That classroom teachers in their pre-undergraduate training be given an introductory understanding of issues to consider with a student who is blind or has low vision in their class including:

- Understanding of the expanded core curriculum in inclusive teaching;
- Inclusive ways of presenting visual material, or to redesign the presentation of the content;
- Adaptive ways of conducting physical or manual activities to include the student who is blind or has low vision;
- Strategies for encouraging social interaction between the student who is blind or has low vision and classmates where isolation is observed;
- An understanding of the potential for a blind student if developing properly;
- An understanding of the wide variability and situational impact of low vision;
- The potential difference blindness versus low vision makes in considering inclusive classes;
- The role of the ISTV;

- Knowledge of accessing other professionals in blindness or low vision;

Recommendation 12:

That, in the event of a teacher being assigned a student who is blind or has low vision, professional development be required to more thoroughly cover the elements in Recommendation 11 above.

Recommendation 13:

Teachers involved in formulating and revising Individual Education Plans, should have training to ensure the IEP is an effective tool for the student who is blind or has low vision. Elements should include:

- An understanding of the rights and responsibilities of all stakeholders in the IEP process;
- An understanding of the importance of adaptation of the core curriculum;
- The elements of the expanded core curriculum and options for assessing progress; and
- How to plan progressively for transitional needs; and
- The importance of seeking the assistance of specialists where required;

Recommendation 14:

That in conjunction with all stakeholders, a review of the Individual Education Plan development processes is conducted to ensure that the long term prognosis of the child's vision condition is taken into account, to avoid inappropriate decisions against teaching Braille and thus condemning a child to poor or no literacy.

Recommendation 15:

That resources be appropriately prioritized to ensure that a child becomes thoroughly literate using Braille along with their peers as early as possible.

Recommendation 16:

That as part of the Individual Education Plan, as early as possible in the primary school years, children begin to receive career guidance at schools, appropriate to their age, and level of vision impairment.

Recommendation 17:

That in conjunction with relevant professionals, a range of programs be instituted or accessed, to facilitate the exploration of, and preparation for progress to further education and employment for students who are blind or have low vision.

Recommendation 18:

That more opportunities be available as part of school activities, after school programs, and during school breaks for children who are blind or have low vision to network, form binding friendships, gain confidence by participation in recreational activities on an equal

bases, and learn a range of life skills with peers and adult role models who are blind or have low vision.

Recommendation 19:

That in conjunction with state, territory and the commonwealth, a national equipment scheme (along the lines of the Workplace Modifications Scheme) be established, which streamlines assessment and supply of equipment to students at a national level; and ensures timely provision of up-to-date and educationally appropriate equipment.

Recommendation 20:

The NSW Department in conjunction with Vision Australia, investigate (and review policy where necessary) to enable greater educational outcomes for students who are blind and have low vision, in line with immerging technologies.

Recommendation 21:

That in instances where a sporting activity is genuinely not accessible to a child, other parallel programs are provided for example organizing activities such as Goalball in which sighted peers can also participate.

Recommendation 22:

That an Education Department process be developed, to address instances of individual schools who exclude children who are blind or have low vision from sporting and physical activities or school excursions and other activities except in the most extenuating circumstances. Further, where additional programs specific to a child's blindness or low vision are conducted, that resources be made available to enable these to occur at times which do not conflict with other activities beneficial to the child's physical or social education.

Recommendation 23:

That the Department of Education and Training and external agencies who could contribute to the IEP process reach an agreed position as to the legitimate role of an external advocate, and that this is conveyed to all stakeholders in the IEP process.

Recommendation 24:

That when the parent of a child with a disability is from a non-English speaking background they be offered an interpreter for equal participation in the IEP process.

Recommendation 25:

That a review of the Individual Education Plan process be undertaken with the involvement of parents, and external specialist who have a legitimate interest - in a separate forum from teaching staff (to provide a non-threatening environment).

That this review be for such purposes as:

- Enabling a full examination of its strengths and weaknesses;
- Revising where necessary, the policy in light of the information

- gathered; and
- To establish readily accessible review and complaints mechanisms for parents and advocates to seek remedy when the process fails.

Recommendation 26:

That any funding formula incorporate funding for regional education, to provide external specialist services (including travel expenses) for a student who is blind or has low vision.

Recommendation 27:

That consideration be given to a funding formula for students who are blind or have low vision in regional areas (without ready availability of government sector ISTV resources) to allocate the estimated cost of supporting a child who is blind or has low vision (both with teaching specialist and adaptive equipment and software) to support that child in a non-government school.

Recommendation 28:

That the Department of Education and training review relevant processes, with the view to improving the monitoring and compliance with policies and procedures related to provision of special education to students with disabilities, including the family friendliness of complaints mechanisms.

Recommendation 29:

That the NSW Education Department does not request that adaptive technology be returned at the completion of secondary education.

As students with vision impairments require assistive technology to access readings and also to write assignments, it is important that they have this available to them in their preferred format and whenever needed. This often means that they are best served by having a laptop with either screen magnification software or screen reading software (or both) which they can take to classes and take home. It is also important that reading material is made available to them in not only an accessible and useable format but in a timely manner (this is often not the case and the student receives readings months later than other students and sometimes are never provided with anything in their preferred format).

Recommendation 30:

Education providers and publishers need to be more aware of their legal obligation to provide reading materials in alternative formats.

Recommendation 31:

That more pressure be placed on Education providers to provide details of alternative format produced texts to the CAL Masters database.

23 REFERENCES

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability

Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth.)

Disability Standards for Education 2005 (under Disability Discrimination Act 1992)

Principles And Standards For The Education Of Children And Youth With Vision Impairments, November 2004, by South Pacific Educators In Vision Impairment (SPEVI)

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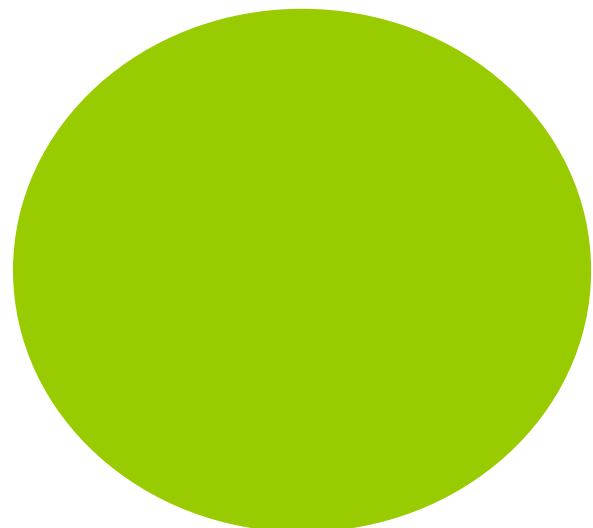
Results and Observations from Research into Employment Levels in Australia
Overview Document
Market Research and Development

March 2007



OUR VISION

Vision Australia is a living partnership between people who are blind, sighted or have low vision. We are united by our passion that in the future people who are blind or have low vision will have access to and fully participate in every part of life they choose.



Introduction

While, figures from the Australia Bureau of Statistics show that about 10% of people with a Vision Impairment are unemployed, other evidence suggests the actual proportion is far higher.

This survey was undertaken to establish an accurate level of employment nationally amongst people who are blind or have low vision, and to discover the reasons people are not working. Additional information about levels of underemployment, limitations in job functions and assistance used was also requested to help guide both Vision Australia's assistance to those that wish to work, as well as to influence local and national policy.

The survey was conducted with the assistance of Blind Citizens Australia and Royal Guide Dogs Association of Tasmania who supported the survey by promoting it to their members and soliciting participants.

Scope

Between September 2006 and January 2007, nearly 2000 people were interviewed in relation to their employment status. The survey was conducted by telephone and was administered by trained consultants to participants across Australia.

This resulted in insights from 1864 respondents who were blind or have low vision (i.e. a vision impairment that cannot be corrected by glasses), aged between 15 and 64 years of age.

Key Findings

Unemployment levels are high

69% of people of working age who are blind or have low vision are not in paid employment. Even if those who are identified as unemployed for reasons of retirement, education, homemaking or as a lifestyle choice are excluded, those who are blind or have low vision are four and a half times more likely to be unemployed than the national average. That is, 63% of the potential labour force with a vision impairment are unemployed, compared to 14% for the population as a whole.

There are many "discouraged workers" who could potentially join the workforce

Four out of every ten people of working age who are blind or have low vision indicate they are unemployed not by their own choice, but are not actively looking for a job. By contrast, the proportion of the population in this "discouraged workers" category at a national level is only 8%.

In fact, only 13% of those who are unemployed not by choice and who are blind or have low vision are actively looking for work.

The proportion of long-term unemployed (those who are unemployed for more than a year) throughout Australia is 33%. This compares with 50% of respondents indicating they have been looking for work for over 12 months. Further, survey

respondents indicated they spend fewer hours per week actively looking for work as the duration of their job hunting increases.

The levels of under-employment (time-based) is higher than national averages

46% of the employed population who are blind or have low vision are working part-time. Furthermore, 13% of those employed indicate they are working part-time because they are unable to find a full-time job. For the Australian population as a whole, the corresponding figures are 28% and 6% respectively. Hence, those who are blind or have low vision are twice as likely to be under-employed than the general population.

There is a higher need for technical skills amongst people who are blind or have low vision

There is a heavier concentration of employment for people who are blind or have low vision in non-manual or non-labour positions. Therefore, the need for this group to be computer-literate and/or to possess other technical skills is elevated. Further, it is clear that the higher the level of education possessed by a person who is blind or has low vision, the more likely they will be employed. Similarly, the more formats of material they can access, the higher their employment opportunities.

Whilst there is a positive relationship between education levels and employment rates, even among blind or low vision post-graduate degree holders, 34% do not have a job.

There are many barriers, albeit unintentional, that prevent equal access to the jobs

Nearly four in every ten job applicants who are blind or have low vision reported difficulties with one or more of their applications. The largest barriers reported included difficulties completing paper forms, problems accessing online applications through specialist technology, difficulties reading print material provided to them at interviews or in assessment centres, needing a drivers licence to comply with selection criteria, and encountering employers who had preconceived ideas about the capabilities (or disabilities) of the applicant.

Amongst the employed population who are blind or have low vision, nearly four out of ten believed that they were limited in their job functions because of their vision. The majority felt they were limited by an inability to access information (such as reading print material or accessing software on computers). However, many indicated they were simply unable to do the job as well as they desired.

35% of survey respondents aged under 25 years indicated that they did not receive career guidance at schools appropriate to their level of vision impairment.

Access to services

Job seekers who are blind or have low vision are 64% more likely to be employed if they have used Vision Australia's Employment services or services of the Disability Employment Network (DEN) compared to those who do not use these services.

Approximately twice as many job seekers who are blind or have low vision use Job Network services compared to DEN, even though these services only lift the likelihood of employment by 24%. This difference is greatest amongst job seekers with low vision, where only 41% of those using Job Networks are employed compared to 64% of those having used DEN.

For a person who is blind or has low vision, the presence of a secondary disability impacts severely on the likelihood of being employed. Of those who reported a second disability, 82.4% stated that they were unemployed. This group was also less likely to be actively looking for work.

Opportunities

Sharing of knowledge about unemployment

The overall level of unemployment amongst those who are blind or have low vision is comparable to levels reported in international studies. Opportunities exist for Vision Australia to consult and cooperate with International Blindness agencies and other research teams to share information and determine a unified way forward.

Rediscovering discouraged workers

On the basis of the large proportion of “discouraged workers” amongst those who are blind or have low vision, the largest impact can be made by encouraging those who have stopped looking for work to return to the employment market, and to resource the capability to place them into suitable employment. Vision Australia operates a government funded employment service and, as a result of this research, the organisation will embark on an advertising campaign to encourage clients to rediscover employment opportunities.

Additional research could be undertaken to establish exactly what will re-motivate these discouraged workers to return to the workforce.

Addressing under-employment

Those using Vision Australia’s Employment services are also less likely to be employed part-time than the rest of the population who are blind or have low vision. Vision Australia is working with employees and employers to overcome barriers to full participation in the workforce.

Opportunity exists for both government departments and employment service providers to promote their services to ensure that those who are blind or have low vision, even when employed, have access to appropriate services.

Increasing appropriate technical skills and ensuring fair job opportunities

Schools should ensure skills taught to students who are blind or have low vision meet their future career needs. Vision Australia offers training in accessing alternative formats, in using computers with appropriate technologies and in using alternative technologies. Vision Australia already works with schools and other educational bodies to provide specialist knowledge where requested.

Where students attend TAFE or university to gain higher educational qualifications, these establishments should ensure they continue to teach life skills that will assist in students realising future job opportunities.

Current human resource management practices often encourage multi-skilling of the workforce (Kim et al, 2003; Overell, 2005). However, these practices increase the entry barriers for many positions. Even process workers are required to be multi-skilled (Garg et al, 2002). Current HR policies need to be mindful that productivity of some employees may increase in mono-skilled positions. There is an opportunity to encourage flexibility in the approach to work duties to meet the needs of both employers and all employees.

Overcoming barriers

Vision Australia actively works with job applicants to overcome the unintentional obstacles that face them during the application and interview processes (such as unnecessary requests for driver's licences, or reading tests at interviews). They also extend this assistance to help employers faced with an applicant who is blind or has low vision to be able to accurately assess the person's skills over their disability. There is a real need for government to work with major employers and recruitment agencies to encourage fair job requirements (e.g. to require driving licences only where essentially needed as part of the position) and to let all employers know that assistance is available should they want to enjoy the benefits of employing someone with a disability.

Vision Australia already works with some schools and offers career guidance at key transition points. However, the survey results indicate that more can be done to ensure career guidance at school is more appropriate to vision. Based on a life-skills model, opportunities exist to support smoother transition from school to further education and onward to work.

Additional research could be undertaken to ascertain the attitudes and perceptions held by employers about job applicants and employees who are blind or have low vision. Outputs of this research would assist in driving appropriate education strategies and activities through clients, employers and governments.

Appropriate referrals and access to government services

The government should ensure that people who are blind or have low vision are made fully aware of the services that are best placed to assist them. Vision Australia, in conjunction with other disability services, should work with government to ensure that job seekers are referred to the appropriate agencies for assistance.

Opportunities exist to work with the government to establish how potential job seekers with multiple disabilities can access the specialist services from multiple agencies necessary to ensure sustainable employment.

Conclusion

The survey has confirmed that the level of unemployment for people who are blind or have low vision in Australia is as high as previously estimated. It also reveals that there are many workers who are blind or have low vision who are under-employed, or

who are discouraged from looking for work when they could potentially join the workforce.

There are several positive opportunities, such as building confidence amongst discouraged workers, promoting the employment assistance available and working with employers to overcome unintentional barriers to employment. Responsibility to follow through with these initiatives lies with Vision Australia, other blindness agencies and bodies, government, employers and the potential employees themselves. Only by working together to address the issues identified here can this socially and economically unacceptable situation be improved.

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The Vision Australia employment survey was undertaken with the support and cooperation of Blind Citizens Australia and Royal Guide Dogs for the Blind Association of Tasmania. Blind Citizens Australia is the peak advocacy organisation of and for people who are blind or have low vision.



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