

**Submission
No 158**

**INQUIRY INTO STUDENTS WITH A DISABILITY OR
SPECIAL NEEDS IN NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOLS**

Organisation: Learning Difficulties Coalition of NSW Inc

Date received: 25 February 2017



Submission to the Parliament of New South Wales,
General Purpose Standing Committee #3

Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs in government and non-government schools in New South Wales

February 2017

The Hon Michael Gallacher
Deputy Chair, General Purpose Standing Committee No. 3
Parliament of New South Wales

26 February 2017

Dear Mr Gallacher,

The Learning Difficulties Coalition of NSW Inc. (LDC) is a peak body educational and advocacy group providing support and information to parents, teachers and health professionals regarding children and adolescents with learning and attention difficulties. The LDC, which has been in existence since 1989, operates a Parent Helpline during school terms. In addition we provide seminars, resources and, most importantly, a voice for parents to government and other partner organisations. The LDC is supported by a Grant-in-Aid from the NSW Department of Education and Communities. Further information can be found on our website: www.ldc.org.au

The Management Committee of the LDC welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the *Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs in government and non-government schools in New South Wales*. We are consistently aware of the support needs of the 20-30% of students in all primary and secondary schools experiencing a wide range of learning disabilities, and take any and every opportunity to speak up for them.

Even though there are a great many issues that need to be addressed, this submission highlights two areas of particular current concern. Firstly, the lack of provision of speech pathology services in NSW Education Department schools means that many of these students are not able to access vital services, from school entry to school leaving. Secondly, the NSW HSC reforms that will be placing very high demands on students' Year 9 NAPLAN results is causing grave concern across the community of secondary students with learning disabilities, their parents, teachers and professionals involved in their support.

Thank you for receiving our submission, and we would be pleased to provide further information as needed to ensure action on the issues raised. We would also be available to appear at a hearing for the inquiry, if this were to eventuate.

With regards,

Julia Starling, PhD
President, LDC Management Committee

Certified Practicing Speech Pathologist
Adjunct Lecturer, The University of Sydney

Primary and Secondary School Students with Learning Disability in NSW Schools

This submission seeks to draw the Standing Committee's attention to some particular issues of concern related to the support of primary and secondary students with language and literacy disabilities in NSW government and non-government schools. Around 20-30% of students in our schools are experiencing some degree of difficulty in learning, from mildly to severely impacting. This population includes students with communication disorders such as Developmental Language Disorder (DLD), reading disorders such as Dyslexia, written language disorders such as Dysgraphia, numeracy difficulty (e.g. Dyscalculia) and attention deficits (e.g. ADHD).

Speech pathologists are professionals highly qualified to provide support to students with language-based learning difficulties at all developmental stages, by assessing, diagnosing, and providing treatment, and by collaborating with health and education professionals to provide essential support programs. However children and adolescents attending schools in NSW are significantly disadvantaged when compared to students in almost all other Australian states and territories, as there is no provision made by the NSW State Government for speech pathology services in primary and secondary schools. As a result parents are only able to use private services, which, even where they do exist, are beyond the reach financially for most of the population.

In summary, the following will be outlined in this submission:

1. Identification of, and impact on learning for, students with language-based learning difficulties.
2. The role of speech pathologists in the school community.
3. Recent NSW HSC/NAPLAN reforms and the implications for students with learning disability.

Who are these students?

The focus of this submission is on as many as 20% of students who have language and literacy problems, that is problems with their language, speech, reading and writing. Both Speech Pathology Australia and the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) identify the primary communication disorder experienced by school-aged children and adolescents as involving language expression and comprehension. A recent Australian study to determine the prevalence of communication disorders and other learning needs, involving 14,500 Sydney primary and secondary school students, identified 19.10% of students as having a specific learning difficulty (including reading disorders), and 13.04% as having a language-based communication disorder (McLeod & McKinnon, 2007). This translates to at least six students in every primary and secondary school classroom with language and literacy difficulties.

Even though most young people with a Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) are assessed as having average to above average intelligence, they have problems understanding and expressing themselves in their primary language, as well as significant problems with many aspects of reading and writing. Language disability is also associated with attention problems such as ADHD (Cohen et al, 2000), specific learning difficulties such

as dyslexia (Snowling, Bishop, & Stothard, 2000), psychosocial problems such as anxiety and depression (Lindsay & Dockrell, 2012), and pervasive developmental disorders such as Autism Spectrum Disorders (Conti-Ramsden, Simkin & Botting, 2006).

Impact of language-based learning disabilities

These students will experience some or all of the following issues in the school environment:

- Having significant problems with listening and reading comprehension, as well as oral and written expression, including all aspects of literacy,
- Having early oral speech and language difficulties leading to problems with literacy and numeracy development from school entry onwards,
- Being much slower than their classmates in processing and acting on information such as verbal and written instructions,
- Being consistently behind in curriculum and conceptual knowledge in all subjects,
- Being disengaged in regular classroom activities,
- Regularly experiencing disadvantage and failure in written tests and exams, often because of their difficulties with reading and interpreting the questions, and because of executive function issues that interfere with the processing, planning and organisation of their ideas, and
- Being frequently identified as having associated emotional, behavioural and/or social skills problems.

Recent research demonstrates that language-based learning disability is life-long (e.g. Whitehouse, Watt, Line, & Bishop, 2009). These young people are at risk of being marginalised from their peer group, of developing significant mental health problems, and of experiencing academic failure, leaving them vulnerable to leaving school early and facing challenges in finding short and long-term employment (Starling, Munro, Togher & Arciuli, 2011). Psychosocial studies emphasise academic failure as a significant risk factor, which along with substance abuse, unemployment and youth offending has the greatest long-term personal impact on adolescents with language disability. There are many current studies that are identifying underlying language-based learning difficulties in juvenile offender and psychiatric services populations (Clegg, Hollis, Mawhood, & Rutter, 2005; Naylor, Staskowski, Kenney, & King, 1994; Snow & Powell, 2011).

The role of the speech pathologist in the school community

Speech pathologists have a vital role within the school community by providing consultative services to classroom teachers and learning support teachers, as well as by providing direct support to school age children with language, literacy and communication needs. Speech pathology services are vital from school entry, and throughout primary and secondary school.

As previously stated there is no provision made by the NSW State Government for speech pathology services in primary and secondary schools. In most instances family have to seek speech pathology services through NSW Department of Health, however these services are in most instances only available until the child enters school, or completes Kindergarten. At that point private speech pathology services are the only option, with financial barriers for most families. In some instances speech pathologists are contracted to work in schools, for

example when a NSW government or non-government school principal makes a discretionary decision. The NSW Catholic Education system is more consistent in its employment of teams of speech pathologists across the different dioceses.

We respectfully refer the Standing Committee to the very comprehensive submission being made by **Speech Pathology Australia (SPA)** to this inquiry, in which the association presents detailed information on all aspects of the need for, and importance of, speech pathology services in NSW schools. The Learning Difficulties Coalition is in complete agreement with all points raised in the submission from SPA, and feels no need to replicate the information in this submission.

Recent NSW HSC/NAPLAN reforms and the implications for students with learning disability.

1. The current situation

The National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), is taken by all Australian students in Years 3,5,7, and 9. Students are assessed for Literacy (Reading, Writing, Spelling, Punctuation, and Grammar) and Numeracy. Results are given for each component on a scale presented in Bands, from 1-10. For Year 9, scores falling in Bands 7-10 are considered to be above the national minimum standard (NMS) for each component, Band 6 is at the NMS, and Bands 1-5 are below the NMS.

2. The reforms

BOSTES (Board of Studies Teaching & Educational Standards NSW) is making the following changes, announced in July 2016 by Adrian Piccoli, NSW Minister for Education at that time:

- There is to be a two-phased reform, over the next 4 years, with a minimum literacy and numeracy standard for HSC eligibility from 2020.
- From 2017, all students must meet this standard by attaining a **minimum Band 8 result in all components of the Year 9 NAPLAN.**
- From 2018 (i.e. for those students not achieving this in the 2017 and beyond) an online literacy and numeracy test will be available. Students will be able to take this on multiple occasions until they demonstrate competency to a minimum Band 8 level.
- Other reforms are focused on changes to the syllabus, particularly in Maths, English, Science and History.

For further information see

<http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/policy-research/stronger-hsc-standards/>

3. The issues

- In 2016 half to two-thirds of all NSW students achieved results in Band 7 or below in all the NAPLAN components (information from ACARA: Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority). This data will undoubtedly include the majority of the students with language and literacy issues, for the reasons outlined in part 1 of this submission (*Who are these students?*). A recent study at Charles Sturt University (2015, not yet published) reported a consistently lower performance by students with speech and language problems on all components of the NAPLAN tests, across all grades, when compared to typically developing students.
- There are no steps in place to provide the extra intensive learning support that will be vital in helping students make the essential gains in their literacy and numeracy abilities. Students will only have the opportunity to re-sit the tests until they “get it right” i.e. pass at the required high level. This is highly unlikely to happen for the majority of students with additional learning needs, without their being given intensive and very direct literacy and numeracy instruction over a period of time.
- Direct literacy and numeracy support needs to start back in early primary school, and teachers continue to be severely under-supported in professional learning in this area, going right back to pre-service teaching i.e. at the undergraduate level. Currently learning support for students with additional learning needs disappears in the main after Year 1, and is almost non-existent in most NSW secondary schools in all sectors.
- There are many students in these statistics who will never be able to reach the required level, including those with all types of learning difficulties and those from Aboriginal and non-English speaking cultural backgrounds. These students have, till now, been quite able to take the HSC and go on to tertiary education if they so wish, and have been doing so historically. Instead there will now be, in effect, a second tier of students who will not only be seen as failures, but who will be leaving school with nothing to show for their 6 years of secondary education.
- Anxiety about these new requirements is already taking hold, across student and parent bodies in particular. Critics of the reforms are afraid that HSC pressure will be transferred to Year 9 students before they are mature enough to handle it, and we will see many students seeing themselves as ‘failures’ from, or even before, the age of 14. If well over half of NSW students did not achieve Band 8 in the 2016 NAPLAN, we are talking about the majority of students.
- There are legal requirements for NSW students to stay in school for Years 11 and 12, unless they have an education, training or employment alternative in place. In having now drastically reduced the tertiary education options through NSW TAFE cuts and increases in TAFE course fees to an unattainable level for many, the number of alternative options available to these ‘failing’ students has been significantly reduced.

- An additional concern is that classroom teachers will now feel the pressure to ‘teach the test’ from Year 7 onwards, when their agenda is already over-loaded with existing curriculum content.

4. Recommendations

1. **To reduce the minimum benchmark to a more realistic level.** Band 6 is already seen as an achievement at the national minimum standard. Band 8 is totally unrealistic for the majority of students, for the reasons outlined above.
2. **Increase literacy and numeracy support as the highest priority,** from school entry onwards and continuing into and throughout secondary education. This would be achievable, in part, by decreasing the amount of curriculum content, which, at the secondary education level in particular, is putting huge teaching pressure on teachers.
3. **Students with additional learning needs,** who are most at risk of failing to achieve this new requirement, **need to be identified** at an early age, and re-identified as they enter secondary school, so that additional learning support can be put into place throughout their primary and secondary education.
4. **Screening of all Year 7 students’ fundamental literacy and numeracy skills** is essential, so that additional learning needs are identified and managed from the start of, and throughout, their secondary education.
5. **Major reforms need to be made to NSW technical education institutions** to provide a broad spectrum of options to all school leavers, in particular by reversing the massive cuts and fee increases currently occurring across the NSW TAFE sector.

Julia Starling (President, LDC)

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