

**Submission
No 156**

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

Organisation: Vision Australia
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**Vision Australia's 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***

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Submission to:

General Purpose Standing Committee No.3, Legislative Council

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Introduction

Vision Australia 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*.

Vision Australia provides services to more than 26,000 people who are blind or have low vision every year to enable them to participate fully in the community. In particular, we provide:

- early childhood and children's services from 0 to 18 years including paediatric counselling, occupational therapy, and speech therapy
- adaptive technology advice and training
- orientation and mobility instruction
- accessible information (including library services) and
- employment services

There are some very good examples of teachers, vision specialists, and other school personnel in New South Wales, providing quality support to students who are blind or have low vision. However there are a number of issues that continue to persist with regards to education for students who are blind and have low vision, including inconsistent approaches to the provision of necessary aids and equipment; insufficient professional development for teaching staff; and a lack of clear expectations and accountability. These issues are present across regions and affect students in both government and non-government schools.

Summary

- Support hours provided to students with a vision impairment, and students' ability to obtain necessary aids and equipment, can vary widely.
- The confidence and ability of families to raise concerns or complaints depends upon the relationship between the family and the school principal, and the size of the community they live in.
- Students' Individual Education Plans should be reviewed and updated regularly, and plans for action executed.
- A lack of literacy options for some students sees them finishing school without having the necessary reading and writing skills to equip them for the future.
- Professional development for educators is crucial to ensure students with disability have access to educators who are confident in using technology, and who are equipped with the relevant skills and knowledge to address the particular needs of the student.

- Decisions made in respect of students' requirements and supports when sitting exams and tests must be addressed early, and well in advance of the exam or test.

(a) equitable access to resources for students with a disability or special needs in regional and metropolitan areas

Focus Area 4 of the NSW Department of Education Disability Inclusion Action Plan 2016-2020 articulates the following outcome, "*Achieving more equitable access to mainstream services for people with disability through better systems and processes*". The actions to meet this Outcome include:

"...4.3 Improved teacher knowledge and skills in recognising and responding to the individualised learning and support needs of students whose disability impacts their learning

4.4 Improved school planning for students with disability

4.5 Improved processes for accessing additional resources for students with disability,...."

In our experience, support hours provided to students with a vision impairment can vary widely; often being dependent on the case load of Itinerant Support Teachers (vision) (ISTv), different approaches taken by Assistant Principals – Vision, and the frequency of visits due to travel distances involved. For students with multiple disabilities, it is not clear to what degree a co-ordinated approach is taken between disability specific specialist teachers in the planning phase of support for students. However, there appears to be a lack of recognition of the compounding effect of multiple disabilities in the allocation of support hours.

While face-to-face ISTv support could, theoretically, be supplemented by use of video conferencing, such as the Department's Virtual Classroom Network, the use of technology to assist students in rural areas to make live interactive support a realistic proposition would be dependent upon improvements to the reliability of the WIFI / internet connection available.

In some regions, recommendations made by Vision Australia staff for adaptive equipment for students, or other equipment such as iPads (with their clear benefits for low vision students), are denied on the basis that the equipment is not on the Department's 'buying list'. Yet in other regions, students are readily able to get approval for equipment. It is not clear where the problem lies; whether Funding Support decisions made by the Department are handled differently and inconsistently by various personnel, or whether there is reluctance by some Assistant Principals - Vision to submit an application.

At the school level, there appears to be variations in schools' willingness to fund simple adjustments for students, such as reading lamps or slope boards (to read and write print at an adjusted height and angle) out of school budgets. However, the reasons for these variations are not clear.

There can be great benefit in Vision Australia specialists working directly with classroom teachers to implement strategies to facilitate students' equitable participation in the classroom. The degree to which this is facilitated is largely dependent on the willingness of the ISTv in the region to welcome involvement of Vision Australia in relationships and consultations with school personnel.

In circumstances where our expert assistance and input is not welcomed, students of families from non-English speaking backgrounds in particular can be further disadvantaged due to language or cultural considerations impacting upon a family's ability to advocate for their child's needs.

(d) complaint and review mechanisms within the school systems in New South Wales for parents and carers

Not all families are aware of the various complaints avenues that exist to escalate matters for resolution. However, it is generally understood that speaking with the school principal is the first step in resolving a complaint.

The degree to which families are willing to raise concerns at the school level, or escalate those concerns, varies depending on the relationship between the family and school principal. Where concerns are not addressed at the school level, very few parents are willing to escalate the matter to the Department, fearing that in doing so, they may jeopardise the relationship with the school, and cause problems for their child. The reluctance to escalate matters can be much greater in smaller rural communities due to the closer connections between people. In one such instance we are advised of a vision impaired student who qualified for vision support but was not able to access the services required due to the principal's belief that it was not necessary. The family did not feel comfortable making a complaint in such a small community.

Further, we have been advised of instances where schools have not empowered parents to raise their concerns. For example, there have been instances of hostility expressed towards parents' right to have an advocate present at school meetings, and in some cases, meetings have been scheduled at times known to be unsuitable for the advocate. Where families are from non-English speaking backgrounds

independent interpreters have not always been engaged, and in some instances, teachers have been used as interpreters, leading to the perception of a lack of independence and possible bias.

(e) any other related matters

i. Reasonable adjustments

Schools must be made aware of their obligations to provide reasonable adjustments, irrespective of whether a student meets the criteria for vision support or not.

It is understood that specialist vision support to students is generally not available to students with a vision level greater than 6/24. However, Vision Australia routinely works with clients who have a vision level greater than 6/24 and who still require adjustments, such as improved lighting, or magnification aids. Students with a vision impairment fall within the scope of the *Disability Discrimination Act*, and are afforded the protections and right to have reasonable adjustments made.

Vision Australia provides, on a fee-for-service basis, environmental and lighting assessments and reports to assist schools to modify the environment to accommodate the needs of students who are blind or have low vision. However, on some occasions, whilst schools have expressed the desire to have Vision Australia conduct such an assessment, they have then been either unable, or unwilling, to fund the assessment.

In making reasonable adjustments, or providing vision supports, we have been made aware of instances where educators have opted to do things quickly rather than teach students to attend to matters within their capabilities. Examples include:

- an ISTv photocopying and enlarging material for a student rather than obtaining the electronic file from the classroom teacher and assisting the student to access it on their computer with screen magnification
- a teacher completing simple computer tasks for a student, rather than teaching these skills to the student
- a teacher expecting students to photograph the smartboard and enlarge it on an iPad (presenting difficulty for the student in correctly focusing the camera), rather than providing electronic material in advance or allowing the student to utilise the smartboard
- the family of a student being expected to enlarge material (which was the responsibility of the school).

ii. Individual Education Plans (IEPs)

In addition to the core curriculum, many of the skills which children who are blind or have low vision need to develop during school years are captured in an Individual Education Plan (IEP) and are delivered by teachers with specialist training in vision-related matters. It is important that students' IEPs be regularly reviewed to ensure that recommendations for supports or learning strategies are followed up with a plan for action - including time frames, responsible parties, and reviews.

Vision Australia frequently provides recommendations for the provision of equipment, use of screen reading software (JAWS) or other technologies for accessing the curriculum, and other adjustments to assist students' access to education. While these recommendations are frequently accepted, in some instances, our recommendations are not ultimately adopted, or, where they are, they are not then adequately monitored for effectiveness. For example we are aware of one instance where an ISTv indicated that it had been some time since she had been trained in the use of JAWS, and no longer felt sufficiently comfortable in teaching it.

Vision Australia recognises the challenge for educators in staying up-to-date with the rapid changes to adaptive technology, including frequency of updates to software. However, it is important that professional development opportunities for staff working with students who are blind or have low vision include adaptive technology training to ensure skills and knowledge remain relevant and current in order to meet the needs of students.

iii. Ongoing assessment of most appropriate literacy medium

Students who are blind or have low vision continue to encounter instances where the teaching of Braille is either delayed, or not taught at all, despite the potential degenerative nature of the student's eye condition, or in the mistaken belief that the student appears to be 'managing' by using large print text. There are also instances where students who use large print text would benefit from being transitioned to audio (including use of a computer with screen reader and speech output) in order to better manage a heavier workload as school years progress.

The lack of literacy options for some students sees some finishing school without having adopted the most appropriate or efficient means of reading and writing to meet their future needs.

iv. Balancing the Expanded Core Curriculum with participation in class

The South Pacific Educators in Vision Impairment (SPEVI) Principles and Practice (2016) sets out a number of Guidelines for students with a vision impairment.

Principle 7 and Practice 7 of the Guidelines articulate a number of areas under an Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) which students who are blind or have low vision should have included in their IEPs. The areas are:

- Compensatory access to information, communication and literacy
- Sensory efficiency
- Technology
- Orientation and mobility
- Physical abilities
- Independent living
- Social interaction
- Recreation and leisure
- Career education
- Self-determination

It is acknowledged that there is a balance to be found with regards to meeting the ECC with the needs of a student to participate in class with fellow sighted students, and that making decisions about learning priorities is not necessarily an easy one.

One possible solution to address these competing demands may be the adjustment of a student's subject load at various stages of education in order to facilitate incorporation of the ECC into the student's school year. For example, the student could consider taking a reduced number of units for the Higher School Certificate.

A further solution may be for the Department of Education to partner with Vision Australia to deliver holiday programs for students which assist in delivering some of the ECC.

The Statewide Vision Resource Centre in Victoria is a good example of a resource available to both students who are blind or have low vision, and to teachers and vision specialists. The Centre provides, amongst other things, opportunities for students to participate in programs to address the ECC, as well as professional development for teachers and other resources to support the teaching of students who are blind or have low vision.

v. Inclusive classroom teaching

When students who are blind or have low vision enter a school, it is important that teachers and other staff receive professional development in respect of:

- awareness raising about blindness and low vision
- creative approaches to inclusiveness
- *Disability Discrimination Act* and the *Disability Standards for Education*
- practical strategies for ensuring equal access to the curriculum.

Not infrequently, students who are blind or have low vision report that they do not feel part of the class. When students are taken out of class for vision support hours and are provided with additional equipment, other students can occasionally view this as being something 'special' and in some instances the blind or low vision student feels concerned that they may be gaining an advantage over their peers. In order for students who are blind or have low vision to feel properly included in a class, both the ISTv and the classroom teacher must work to foster an environment where classrooms are set up to maximise the participation of a student who is blind or has low vision without the need for a different seating configuration from other students, and also be aware of the need to audio describe visual material.

vi. "Bring your own device"

The current trend towards schools allowing students to 'bring your own device' should not be used as an excuse or reason to avoid funding necessary supports and equipment for students with disability. Parents should not be asked to fund the purchase of an iPad to enlarge their child's text, or buy a laptop which needs to have screen reading or magnification software installed. These are costs which many parents cannot afford and would not buy if their child were sighted.

Students must be provided with the most appropriate equipment to meet their disability specific access and educational needs; rather than the most popular, cheapest, or easily available.

vii. Timing of funding decisions

It is understood that requests for Funding Support are considered every 2 months during the school year. However, during the course of a year, a student's vision may change, necessitating a change in supports, such as the need to start learning Braille, transitioning from large print to audio, or transitioning from regular print to using a television magnifier in the classroom.

The process for obtaining funding needs to be flexible enough to address changes in a student's vision, which then requires additional or different necessary supports to be made available quickly to ensure the student's school year can be completed.

viii. Lack of utilisation of smartboard technology

We are aware of instances where smartboard technology exists in schools but is not being fully utilised. In part this may be due to (erroneous) concerns about security. However, where smartboards exist, teachers should be supported to make full use of this technology to improve access for students with low vision, including through links with a student's iPad.

x. Special Provisions for NAPLAN and Higher School Certificate

NAPLAN tests

We are aware of instances where students who are blind or have low vision have been denied access to the equipment or methods of accessing text that they are accustomed to when sitting their NAPLAN test.

There appears to be a lack of clarity about the application of 'special provisions' for completing the tests and specifically, whose responsibility it is to make a decision about them; the Department of Education or the school. It is suggested that clear guidelines would be beneficial in this regard.

Higher School Certificate

In relation to conduct of the Higher School Certificate, we are aware of instances where students have been advised that they will not be permitted to use a particular reading and writing system or piece of technology to complete Higher School Certificate exams, even in circumstances where students have adopted particular strategies for reading and writing which best meets their learning needs and have become used to that way of learning over a number of years.

However the Board of Studies has very rigid approaches to what is permitted when schools apply for 'Special Provisions' for the HSC Exam.

Vision Australia appreciates that the Board of Studies must ensure that all students are marked on an equitable basis. However, it is recommended that the Board of Studies regularly review practices and technologies used by students with disabilities to ensure decisions made about accessing text and information is in line with the range of strategies students use for accessing the curriculum.

Vision Australia has advocated strongly for students to be permitted to use a laptop in tests and exams where a laptop has been their primary and usual method to access information and complete their studies. More recently, some students with low vision have been able to access their education curriculum using iPads, yet, despite the ability to lock down iPads for exams, we understand they may not be permitted as 'Special Provisions' in HSC exams.

It is important that students' requirements for exams are considered promptly and options discussed at the earliest opportunity to provide students with sufficient time to become familiar with, and efficient in using the approved methods well in advance of the exam period.

xi. Support for post-school transition

Unfortunately, many students who are blind or have low vision leave secondary school without the requisite skills needed to transition to life post-school and which could quite easily have been addressed whilst at school.

Itinerant Support Teachers (Transition) may be of benefit to students who are blind or have low vision transitioning from school to work or further education to assist students to:

- identify and gain work experience opportunities during school years (a persistent and significant gap identified by job seekers who are blind or have low vision)
- identify where their skills may be lacking (such as the ability to take lecture notes)
- identify opportunities for scholarships
- learn self-advocacy skills.

xii. Specialist support staff

It is understood there has been a move in recent years in some (Catholic) schools for students with disabilities to be provided with support by a generalist special education support teacher, rather than by a specialist in vision impairment (with the exception of students who require Braille). A lack of specialist vision support for students who have a vision impairment can negatively impact upon the extent to which they are able to address the ECC and be equipped with the necessary skills for work and life post-school. Through our contact with some non-government schools it would appear that, anecdotally at least, some schools, are facing reductions in funding and are required to directly fund supports for students with disabilities. We are also aware of at least one instance where a young student who is blind was advised (by the Catholic Education office) that the school would be unable to provide support to the student, and referred the student to a government school.

About Vision Australia

Vision Australia is the largest national provider of services to people who are blind, deafblind, or have low vision in Australia. We are formed through the merger of several of Australia's most respected and experienced blindness and low vision agencies, celebrating our 150th year of operation in 2017.

Our vision is that people who are blind, deafblind, or have low vision will increasingly be able to choose to participate fully in every facet of community life. To help realise this goal, we provide high-quality services to the community of people who are blind, have low vision, are deafblind or have a print disability, and their families.

Vision Australia service delivery areas include:

- allied health and therapy services, and registered provider of specialist supports for the NDIS and My Aged Care
- aids and equipment, and assistive/adaptive technology training and support
- Seeing Eye Dogs
- National Library Services
- Early childhood and education services, and Felix Library for 0-7 year olds
- Employment services, including national Disability Employment Services provider
- Accessible information, and Alternate Format Production
- Vision Australia Radio network, and national partnership with Radio for the Print Handicapped
- Spectacles Program for the NSW Government
- advocacy and engagement, working collaboratively with Government, business and the community to eliminate the barriers our clients face in making life choices and fully exercising rights as Australian citizens.

Vision Australia has gained unrivalled knowledge and experience through constant interaction with clients and their families, of whom we provide services to more than 26,000 people each year, and also through the direct involvement of people who are blind or have low vision at all levels of the organisation. Vision Australia is therefore well placed to provide advice to governments, business and the community on the challenges faced by people who are blind or have low vision fully participating in community life.

We have a vibrant Client Reference Group, with people who are blind or have low vision representing the voice and needs of clients of the organisation to the Board and management. Vision Australia is also a significant employer of people who are blind or have low vision, with 14.5% of total staff having vision impairment.

Vision Australia also has a Memorandum of Understanding with, and provides funds to, Blind Citizens Australia, to strengthen the voice of the blind community. We also operate Memorandums of Understanding with Australian Hearing, and the Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Community Health Service.

ENDS