

**Submission  
No 163**

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

**Organisation:** Hear For You

**Date received:** 26 February 2017

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**The General Purpose Standing Committee  
NSW Legislative Council**

Via-email  
Government House  
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Committee Chairperson

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

Hear For You presents its submission on behalf of deaf and hard of hearing teenagers and the parents of the deaf and hard of hearing teenagers who have been involved in the organisation's programs since 2008.

I offer the following submission as an index of unmet need and a call for equity in government and non-government schools for every NSW deaf and hard of hearing high school student; and their families.

Yours sincerely

David Brady  
Chief Executive Officer

23<sup>rd</sup> December 2016

# **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**

## **General Purpose Standing Committee No.3**

**Hear For You Limited**

**26 February 2017**

### **Introduction**

Hear For You is a national charity established in 2008 with a vision for all young people who are deaf or hard of hearing to reach their full potential in life. This is achieved through delivery of an evidence based, intensive and NDIS accredited Life Goals Development and Skills Program for deaf and hard of hearing teenagers aged 13 – 18 years. Programs are designed to address the psychosocial needs of this cohort, improving their knowledge, skills, well-being and connections.

Hear For you is the only specialist charity for deaf teenagers in New South Wales, let alone Australia. The majority of participants are those deaf or hard of hearing teenagers who use voice to speak and their devices to hear. Mentoring programs are offered to both deaf teenagers who communicate orally and in certain locations for those who use Auslan as their preferred mode of communications.

Our interest is focused around the needs of deaf and hard of hearing teenagers who participate in Hear For You's programs as well as this age cohort at large. Given our positioning in the sector, we would like to offer comments and recommendations to this Standing Committee on Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs in government and non-government schools in New South Wales.

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

Hear For You is the only mentoring service for deaf teenagers and it is well-placed to see firsthand the issues of not having a cohesive framework of support for today's generation particularly of oral deaf teenagers with hearing aids and cochlear implants.

Parents with teenagers in the oral programs of Hear For You have indicated that there is a lack of social support services for teenagers who use hearing devices, and hear and speak in NSW. This of which is contrasted with their common perception of heightened awareness and funding towards Auslan deaf teenagers services, especially from their parents.

The lack of awareness of hearing loss from other students and teachers at mainstream high schools is a common theme among the deaf and hard of hearing teenagers who have attended or are attending Hear For You. Group discussions during the mentoring workshops commonly include the shared perception that there have been some small improvements in terms of technological and teacher support when comparing high school experiences of our mentors and our deaf teenage mentees, but not much has changed by way of attitudes and social well-being among hearing peers. Feedback from pre-program mentee and parent surveys showed that 87% indicated a lack of educational and community awareness among all high school teachers and students around Hearing loss and deafness. Other feedback indicated a lack of understanding from teachers and principals in relation to what is required to ensure the school supports the need for equitable access and support provisions for the deaf or hard of hearing student.

A teenager from the 2016 program in Sydney quoted "hearing loss is the invisible disability that no one in her school, including teachers gets" and she felt people forget about her hearing loss issues in the classroom and social settings often. Additionally, a common misconception is adolescents with cochlear implants or hearing aids are 'fixed' however studies indicate substantial impacts of their educational and social lives. (Punch, Hyde, 2011) Research indicates 30% – 40% of students with mild/unilateral hearing losses experience difficulty with; speech production, speech and language proficiency and psychosocial outcomes (Australian Hearing, 2010).

Stigmatism about being deaf and wearing devices is a core challenge for deaf teenagers attending Australian high schools. Four parents from different Hear For You programs, in NSW, in 2015 to

2016 all indicated that one recurring challenge with their deaf or hard of hearing teenagers is to convince them to keep their hearing devices on during school upon learning from their teachers that the teen takes them out and refuses to wear them. Of these teenagers, one quoted, “I take my hearing aid out as they are ugly and don’t make me normal, I just want to fit in.” The stigma associated with their hearing loss is often expressed within the secure space of a Hear For You mentoring session between mentees from different schools. Other parents during parent sessions at Hear For You describe the frustrations of their child’s classroom teachers refusing the use the FM systems their child uses and in some cases refuse to use them.

It is difficult for oral deaf people, especially teenagers to identify as deaf sometimes because they do not use Auslan and outdated stereotypes have prevented them from being able to realise or self-advocate for themselves and the support they actually need. Typically they are trying to subscribe to the mentality that one should battle through and ‘she’ll be right’ despite their daily challenges. These teenagers don’t see themselves as hard of hearing at times as they believe it is a term used to describe elderly people who have lost their hearing later in life. Yet with these elderly people, similar mental health issues begin to emerge when they start to lose their hearing – isolation, erosion of self-esteem and independence, fear of being unable to carry on with normal life and a refusal to identify as deaf/hard of hearing/hearing impaired. Outdated stereotypes that characterize deaf people as those who use Auslan who use little to no communication via speech contribute to denial and exacerbate issues.

There is no cohesive framework in NSW schools of wholistic hearing support that caters for the total spectrum of all deaf/hard of hearing/hearing impaired teenagers, irrespective of the timing of their hearing loss diagnosis due to the mix of various hearing technologies delivered through particular companies, public and private audiology clinics and the lack of support after early childhood years, that is, if hearing loss is present or picked up in those years.

The Australian schooling system contributes to this inability to deliver a cohesive framework of support as these oral deaf teenagers are often isolated in mainstream public, Catholic, independent educational institutions or even are home-schooled. Collectively the well-being and psychosocial health of thousands of teenagers is impacted. Parents often find themselves advocating consistently for their child, even with support from their itinerant teachers of the deaf.

**(b) The impact of the Government's 'Every Student Every School' policy on the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs in New South Wales public schools**

Overall feedback from parents of past and existing mentees indicated that not much has changed. Hear For You believes a review of the level of supports allocated towards deaf and hard of hearing teenagers in all schools for all levels and types of hearing loss is imperative. It fears the NDIS will make it harder for all deaf and hard of hearing teenagers to access the same level of support, especially if their hearing loss is not deemed eligible for support as it is not severe or profound enough.

There is a lot of well-deserved attention to young children with hearing loss via early intervention programs that has improved their literacy and educational outcomes, but support services and provision of funding drop off when they reach high school as there is a perception that gaining hearing devices and the ability to speak means that their hearing loss has been fixed.

Feedback collated since 2008 through Hear For You workshops clearly indicate support for addressing social isolation, stigmatism and skills is a significant need and can make profound positive impacts on the lives of deaf teenagers. Teenagers who attend the programs generally expressed the challenges of making themselves understood and have to shoulder the burden of having to become their own self-advocate and constantly explain that they do have a hearing loss to their peers, social groups, teachers, and medical professionals. With their hearing loss, they may miss out on social cues and suffer from gaps in their social and academic knowledge which renders them as different from their peers despite their best efforts to fit in. This leads to social isolation and a fear that if they don't keep up, they will be left behind. This is not to state the support from many Teachers of the deaf is lacking, but more of a case of being an invisible disability with a lack of understanding of the limits of technology that is the challenge. Especially when it comes to deaf teenagers and parents having to consistently explain to their peers and teachers about their limitations of the hearing loss in a fast changing world that brings higher expectation of technological cures.

Research indicates children who have problems making themselves understood are at high risk of social isolation and are 4 times more likely to have a mental health disorder<sup>1</sup>. Risk of mental health issues isn't associated with the degree of hearing impairment. Rather, it is the level of communication and social difficulty experienced that affects mental health<sup>2</sup>. The challenges of being a teenager becoming magnified and exacerbated by their hearing loss.

For teenagers the challenges of using hearing devices is compounded by the challenges of their ongoing and changing hearing requirements such as the need to update regularly their hearing aid moulds or upgrade to the latest technology or in the case of mild hearing loss, increase the size of their hearing devices. Some teenagers experience declining hearing loss as they grow older, due to their personal health conditions.

Most of the deaf and hard of hearing teenagers use technology and itinerant teacher support to help them integrate into the Australian community and into their social settings. However there are cases where the technology does not always work or is not accepted by their school or communities. Some teenagers and parents indicate that they have had to advocate personally for basic support such as teacher awareness or exam provisions or itinerant teacher support or live captions to be switched on at their schools. They also found that it was very difficult for them to obtain remote live captions to use for their education, in particular in complex verbally delivered knowledge present in senior school subjects. The funding to support these basic classroom and student supports and live captioning is at the determination of the teenager's school and in almost every case, despite the availability of the technology, the school is unable to cover this as part of their disability support funding.

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<sup>1</sup> Fellingner, J., Holzinger, D., Sattel, H., Laucht, M., & Goldberg, D. (2009). Correlates of mental health disorders among children with hearing impairments. *Developmental Medicine and Child Neurology*, 51, 635–641.

<sup>2</sup> A Hogan, M Shipley, L Strazdins, A Purcell, E Baker - Australian and New Zealand journal of public health, 2011 [Communication and behavioural disorders among children with hearing loss increases risk of mental health disorders](#)

**c. Developments since the 2010 Upper House inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs and the implementation of its recommendations**

Feedback from parents of Hear For You mentees mentions little change in the way the supports are provided at their NSW secondary school. Some went as far as stating that they are having to advocate more for fair and necessary supports for their deaf teenager. Issues are around access to special provisions for examinations, in particular the HSC, in areas such as extra time and use of supports. Other challenges include the lack of, or denial of use of captions on the educational films or programs on media by the teacher or even in the video itself.

Since 2010, there have been significant developments in new technology that would no doubt improve the accessibility and support of oral deaf and hard of hearing students in secondary schools. These include the evolution of the internet that can bring faster and more accurate live on-line captioning and even on-line video interpreters that a operator remotely can pick up the teachers voice, then translate or transcribe into captions or Auslan directly to the student in the classroom via their laptop or tablet. There are better FM and Hearing Device microphone systems that teachers can speak into a microphone that feeds directly into the hearing device of the deaf student. This technology has improved to include whole of classroom sound-field systems that improve the acoustics not only for the deaf and hard of hearing student but for all students in the same class. Hence the deaf or hard of hearing student won't be the only student having the teacher speak into a microphone and being singled out.

Another area that has developed in the field of mentoring, is schools outreach programs by lived experienced persons. Hear For You have been monitoring and gathering information from Batyr (mental health mentoring for teenagers) Batyr@School program<sup>1</sup> and AIME (indigenous mentoring for teenagers) AIME school visit program<sup>2</sup> to see if their models can be applied to deaf and hard of hearing students and hearing students in mainstream schools in NSW. The schools outreach programs brings trained lived experienced young adults as schools outreach officers to the high school (or at a host school), to meet, listen to and share person hindsight tips with the teenagers. In the case for Batyr, mental health issues, and for AIME around indigenous issues.

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<sup>1</sup> Batyr website re school program <http://www.batyr.com.au/school-programs/> and

<sup>2</sup> AIME website re school program <https://aimementoring.com/about/aime/>



These two organisations conducted successful programs, which as good practice, could form the basis of a model for one for deaf and hard of hearing teenagers.

This outreach program for deaf and hard of hearing teenagers, working with state health and education authorities, could also have the additional benefit of providing the education to hearing teenager peers at the school about hearing loss, prevention strategies, and what are the best ways to communicate with those close to them who have a hearing loss. This outreach would be designed to complement the schools itinerant teachers of the deaf or disabilities.

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

We have nothing to add to this term of reference

**(e) Any other related matters.**

According to Australian Hearing, there are between 9,800 to 10,200 deaf or hard of hearing teenagers in Australia have some form of hearing loss in both or one ear. The majority of these teenagers use voice and hear with their devices, and do not have a relationship or affiliation with deaf children or community who communicate using Auslan (Australian Sign Language).

In addition to the anecdotal evidence collated by HFY, it is known that 30 – 40% of students with mild or unilateral hearing losses experience difficulty with one or more of; speech production, speech and language proficiency, psychosocial outcomes (Australian Hearing, 2010). Children with cochlear implants continue to lag behind their hearing peers in academic and social domains<sup>1</sup>.

Research indicates mental health problems can be over 40% for deaf adolescents<sup>2</sup> and 83% of deaf students who use oral communication are isolated within the 2704 mainstream Australian high

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<sup>1</sup> Punch R, Hyde MB, 2011; Communication, Psychosocial, and Educational Outcomes of Children with Cochlear Implants and Challenges Remaining for Professionals and Parents

<sup>2</sup> 2 van Eldik, 2005; van Eldik, Treffers, Veerman & Verhulst, 2004; van Gent, Goedhart, Hindley & Treffers, 2007; Vostanis, Hayes, Du Feu & Warren, 1997

schools. There are approximately 20,000 deaf Australians under 21. Often parents don't understand their challenges given 90% are born to hearing parents.<sup>1</sup>

Often parents don't understand their challenges given 90% are born to hearing parents<sup>2</sup>. Hear For You's at every session between 2012 and 2016 held parent sessions and it was realised that 80% parents of the mentees attending Hear For You programs indicate they do not have any real experience with hearing loss or an understanding of the challenges their deaf or hard of hearing teenagers face on a daily basis.

In our parent sessions that Hear For You hosts at the beginning of each session for parents of mentees, 90% of all parents when speaking about their child with other parents in the forum, shared their observations of their deaf or hard of hearing teenager's anger, frustrations, and withdrawal from school, social and family lives. All of the parents who have more than one child in their family and their other child being with normal hearing, indicate there is a clear difference between in these behaviours and its occurrences between their deaf and hearing children. A majority of these parents believe this as impacted on their family dynamics, health and well-being not only for the deaf child but the immediate family around them and their children.

An estimated 76% of feedback in surveys completed by the deaf and hard of teenagers about how they are feeling before starting Hear For You session include the following descriptors; embarrassed, angry, frustrated, sad, lonely, shy, withdrawn, and weird. Post Hear For You sessions after having met and worked with the volunteer mentors, the descriptors from the mentees transformed to; elated, glad, happy, cleansed, relaxed, awesome, strong, invigorated, and unsinkable being common statements. Furthermore from the post session surveys held at every Hear For You session, 90% of all mentees indicate a positive impact in knowledge, skills, attitudes and connections following program attendance. Longitudinal studies have not been completed however anecdotally former participants have attributed Hear For You with transformational change in their awareness, confidence and connections

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<sup>1</sup> Mitchell RE, Karchmer MA. Chasing the mythical ten percent: Parental hearing status of deaf and hard of hearing students in the United States. *Sign Language Studies*. 2004;4(2):138-163.

<sup>2</sup> Mitchell RE, Karchmer MA. Chasing the mythical ten percent: Parental hearing status of deaf and hard of hearing students in the United States. *Sign Language Studies*. 2004;4(2):138-163.

The cost for engagement in the program per teenager averages at \$2,100 which has been delivered to 368 participants since 2009. Whilst a detailed cost benefit analysis has not yet been produced the positive impact on mental health and well-being; positive impacts of stigmatisation of wearing devices or being deaf and social isolation; productivity through educational and career development; and connection with community, are evidenced. The long term savings to the health, disability and education sector coupled with increased contribution to the economy and community through Hear For You's intervention if delivered to thousands of identified deaf teenagers in need of support is expected to be in the millions of dollars of direct and indirect savings to Australia overall.

Over the recent three years, Hear For You have experienced a growing number of deaf and hard of hearing teenagers from non-Australian born residents in the overall population through its programs. It is important to recognise that hearing health is crucial for their integration or continued inclusion in their lives in Australia. Their challenges are different, as in delayed communications, poor social interaction skills, and greater stigmatic issues within their families around the deaf teenager.

**Recommendations for consideration:**

Hear For You recommends that the Standing Committee considers:

RECOMMENDATION 1 - That the NSW government investigates best practice to provide the education to all high school students across Australia on deafness, hearing health issues, and prevention of hearing loss – to start the conversation at school and overcome the stigma of hearing loss.

RECOMMENDATION 2 - Commission an academic study across ALL schools into the levels of speech production, speech and language proficiency, and psychosocial outcomes of all deaf and hard of hearing school students to find best cost saving solutions to ensure better outcomes post education

RECOMMENDATION 3 - Implement a trial outreach program through partnership between federal and state government education and youth departments contracting youth mentoring organisations specialising in deaf and hard of hearing with ready-made trained deaf outreach workers.

Accompany the trial with independent research to determine the outcomes of the trial to test feasibility of program state wide.