

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

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Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children

General Purpose Standing Committee No. 3

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 Summary

The Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children (RIDBC) is pleased to make this submission to the Inquiry being undertaken General Purpose Standing Committee No. 3 into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs in government and non-government schools in New South Wales.

In this submission, RIDBC provides consideration of a range of issues pertaining to the education of students with sensory disabilities (i.e., students who are deaf or hard of hearing and students who are blind or vision impaired). Having considered these issues, implications are drawn for consideration by the Standing Committee and recommendations are made in regard to Terms of Reference 1 and 5 of the Inquiry. In summary, RIDBC has made the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1

That Government should take such steps as are necessary to ensure a comprehensive continuum of program options for children who are deaf or hard of hearing (i.e., ranging from separate schools or support classes to fully inclusive regular school environments). Having noted this requirement, RIDBC acknowledges that not all options need to be made available within all sectors of the education system (i.e., government and non-government). Rather, there is a need for government to accept responsibility for ensuring that service provisions are comprehensive and adequately resourced across all sectors. To these ends, RIDBC recommends that:

- Consideration be given to how a comprehensive range of options can best be sustained, whether that is by government alone or in collaboration and cooperation with organisations in the non-government sector such as RIDBC; and
- Consideration be given to how such provisions can best be made available to ensure there is access to appropriately specialised services for students who are geographically removed from major centres of population. To this end, collaborative endeavours to ensure access through innovative methods of tele-practice will be imperative to serve the needs of this low incidence group.

Similarly, it is recommended that consideration be given to how the government and the non-government sectors can better collaborate and innovate to provide comprehensive and accessible educational services for students who are blind or vision impaired in all locations—particularly rural and regional locations—through tele-practice.

Recommendation 2

Given that children with hearing loss should be fitted as early as possible with appropriate assistive hearing technology (hearing aids and/or cochlear implants) there is an emergent need to ensure that there is no diminution of the Commonwealth Government's commitment to the provision of free and universally available access to hearing services and hearing equipment under the terms of the current Hearing Services Program. These services underpin

the capability of the education system for deaf and hard of hearing students at all levels of the education system.

Given the currently planned transition of the Commonwealth's Hearing Services Program to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), The New South Wales Government should urge the Commonwealth Government to ensure that there is no diminution in the scope or regional availability of the services currently offered under the Hearing Services Program.

Recommendation 3

That the Government, through the Department of Education, takes such steps as are necessary to ensure the requirement that all auditory-dependent technologies that are used in schools should be made fully accessible to students with hearing loss as a matter of obligation. Such access may include the use of captioning or the inclusion of sign language interpretation for all audio-visual materials used in the curriculum. Similarly, all instructional software should be guaranteed to be accessible to students who are deaf or hard of hearing by ensuring that there are captions or sign language versions available.

Recommendation 4

That the Government takes such steps as are necessary to ensure that:

- Students who are blind or vision impaired have access to appropriate specialist teaching and other supports to guarantee the development of their literacy skills in their required/preferred medium (i.e., Braille or other alternative format). Where the medium of access is Braille then highly specialised interventions and teaching must be assured for all students regardless of their geographic location or educational level;
- Access to such educational support services, whether they be additional to or wholly integrated within a school program, must include an assurance that instructional materials will be available to blind and vision impaired students in their required medium (i.e., Braille, large print, electronic format, etc.) at the same time as they are available to their sighted peers;
- All vision-dependent technologies and print materials that are used in schools should be fully accessible to students with vision impairment as a matter of obligation; and
- There needs to be an assured supply of educational and recreational reading materials for students of all ages. To this end, appropriate funding and support for Braille and large print production agencies needs to be ensured across all educational sectors—government and non-government.

Recommendation 5

That the Inquiry Report makes recommendations concerning the assurance of adequate levels of government funding to provide support for the integration of students with disabilities, regardless of whether those students attend government or non-government schools.

Recommendation 6

That the Inquiry Report makes recommendations concerning: (a) the need to ensure a nexus between appropriate qualification and the deployment of teachers to work with the population of children with sensory disabilities in early education, preschool, and school environments; (b) the assurance of appropriate levels of government funding to provide for the ongoing provision of highly specialised teacher training for teachers of children with sensory disabilities, and (c) the need for government to fund mechanisms for ensuring that teachers are encouraged to undertake such training (e.g., through funded scholarships/assistantships or the encouragement of use of Commonwealth Supported Places for teachers such studies within the University system).

RIDBC has the capacity to provide extensive additional information in regard to the issues being considered by the Inquiry, as they pertain to students with sensory disabilities. As such, the organisation would welcome the opportunity to present further evidence to the Inquiry and/or to respond to questions about any aspect of service provision for students with sensory disabilities in New South Wales education—across all sectors.

About Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children

Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children (RIDBC) is Australia's largest non-government provider of therapy, education, and cochlear implant services for children and adults with hearing loss or vision impairment, their families, and the professionals who support them.

RIDBC's Mission is to provide quality and innovative services to achieve the best outcomes for current and future generations of Australians with hearing loss and/or vision impairment.

The organisation takes pride in working in collaboration with children, adults, and their families to tailor services that support and fit individual needs and life goals.

Services for children, adults, families, and professionals include:

- Assessment and diagnostics
- Early intervention and early learning programs
- Specialist preschools, schools, and school support
- Teleschool and telepractice programs (i.e., remote service delivery via telecommunications platforms)
- Therapy and re/habilitation services
- Audiology and cochlear implant services
- Research, postgraduate award courses, and continuing professional education.

RIDBC is committed to the provision of high quality educational programs across all school levels for students who are deaf or hard of hearing, blind or who have low vision. Many of the students we serve also have additional cognitive disabilities and/or health care needs.

RIDBC has four specialist preschools available to any child in the Sydney or Newcastle region with a significant hearing impairment. These preschools provide innovative programs for children aged 3-5 years.

RIDBC VisionEd Preschool provides a specialized program for children who are blind or who have significant vision impairment.

RIDBC provides three educational options for school age students:

- RIDBC Alice Betteridge School, which caters for students from K-12 who are blind or have low vision and intellectual disability;
- RIDBC Thomas Pattison School, which caters for deaf and hard of hearing students from K -10 through a bilingual (Auslan-English) curriculum; and
- RIDBC Garfield Barwick School, which caters for students from K-6 who are deaf or hard of hearing and use oral communication to engage with the curriculum.

Additionally, RIDBC School Support Services offers specialist educational support services to metropolitan independent schools that have enrolled students who have a significant hearing loss or vision impairment. RIDBC School Support Service (Hearing) provides qualified specialist teachers to schools to enable them to cater for the needs of students in years K-12. RIDBC School Support Service (Vision Impairment) assists metropolitan independent schools to provide full access to the school curriculum for students who are blind or who have significant vision impairment. Through innovative telepractice programs RIDBC Teleschool provides support to a wider range of children with sensory disability in regular schools regional and remote areas of New South Wales.

For more information about RIDBC, visit www.ridbc.org.au.

Broad Response to the Terms of Reference

Rather than addressing the terms of reference individually, this submission provides consideration of a range of issues pertaining to the education of students with sensory disabilities (i.e., students who are deaf or hard of hearing and students who are blind or vision impaired). Having considered these issues implications are drawn for consideration by the Standing Committee and recommendations are made in regard to Terms of Reference 1 and 5.

This response is divided into three sections: (a) the need for specialised support for students who have sensory disabilities (b) issues that pertain to the adequate preparation and deployment of specialised teaching and support staff to work with students with sensory disabilities; and (c) issues that pertain to funding of those specialised supports in the Independent School sector.

1. The need for specialised support and equitable access to resources for students who have sensory disabilities

As noted in the "Every Student, Every School" support documentation, students with disability require particular provisions in order to ensure that they have equitable access to the full range of educational opportunities and to achieve success. Provisions are required as a matter of equity. Specialised provisions for students are needed to meet the aspirations of equitable education, including promoting a culture of excellence in all schools and personalising learning to ensure that the potential of each student is met.

The population of children who require specialist educational services because of a sensory disability is extremely diverse. These disabilities are, by nature, very low in incidence. Therefore, children with these disabilities are both sparsely distributed across the state *and* have widely varying educational support and access needs across the population.

1.1 Issues in providing support and equitable access for students who are deaf or hard of hearing

Children who are deaf or hard of hearing have widely divergent needs and preferences in regard to (a) the primary language and/or mode of communication used in their education (e.g., oral communication, sign language, or some form of sign supported communication); and (b) their individual use of technological interventions (e.g., hearing aids, cochlear implants, remote microphone hearing systems, sound field systems, captioning technology, etc.).

This diversity within the population of children who are deaf or hard of hearing and the need for comprehensive services to serve *all members* of such a diverse group raises, among others, the following issues:

Early intervention and early childhood education

- Early identification of hearing loss and early and intensive family centred intervention for children who are deaf or hard of hearing and their families has proven to be a critical component in achieving positive developmental and educational outcomes for this group.
- The availability of universal newborn hearing screening and associated interventions (including the earlier application of cochlear implant technology) has enabled more age-appropriate developmental outcomes for children who are deaf in New South Wales than ever before. *However*, such interventions are not a panacea for the many issues faced by children who are born with hearing loss and their families. The continuing availability of *specialist* educational support services remains a necessary component of effective service delivery and the achievement of positive educational outcomes for this group.
- Parents of deaf and hard of hearing children should routinely receive accurate and unbiased information about their child's development and the nature and availability of different educational program options for their children, including the availability of different approaches to communication and language development. There should be continuing capacity for decisions to be reviewed and programs to be amended according to individual needs and requirements.

Communication and language

- The development of age-appropriate and effective communication and language skills is fundamental to a deaf or hard of hearing child's academic, social, cognitive, and linguistic development, as well as their mental and physical wellbeing.
- Children who are deaf or hard of hearing should have their individual communication and language needs fully assessed as infants *and throughout their educational experience* as a basis for decision-making about appropriate educational support for their access to the curriculum, regardless of whether they are in a regular school or specialist environment.
- Educational programs should provide for a range of intervention options according to the assessed needs and desires of each child and family.
- Teacher education and subsequent teacher employment processes should be structured to ensure that classroom teachers and/or specialist support teachers have the required high level of proficiency in (a) the language and mode of communication that is required for their deployment in specialised educational environments for deaf students, and (b) the particular pedagogies associated with the effective development of language via that language and mode of communication.
- Children who are deaf or hard of hearing should, as part of their programmed educational experiences, have access to a sufficient number of age, developmental, and communication/language peers. Individual integration in the absence of communication/language peers *may* be counterproductive in terms of educational and social-emotional outcomes.

- Where interpreters are used as part of a response to the language and communication needs of students who are deaf, they should be certified in accordance with national standards for interpreters (i.e., NAATI).

Program location and service options

It is important that decisions relating to placement/program type should be based on the unique communication, language, social, and developmental needs of individual students. The unique linguistic and social issues associated with deafness **may** dictate that a special school or support class program (i.e., where a “critical mass” of linguistic peers is integrated into a regular school program) is more appropriate than a fully included placement in a regular school classroom.

The appropriateness of any type of placement—fully included or separate school—should be judged only in terms of the individual needs of particular children. Value should not be ascribed to one type of program on any basis other than individual children’s requirements. The aims of all placement options should be for a child to achieve academic, personal, and social outcomes commensurate with their own potential, regardless of the language or communication mode that is being used.

It is RIDBC's contention that state educational authorities should seek to ensure that there remains available a comprehensive continuum of program options for children who are deaf or hard of hearing (i.e., ranging from separate schools or support classes to fully inclusive environments). Having noted this requirement, RIDBC acknowledges that not all options need to be made available within all sectors of the education system (i.e. government and non-government). However, there is a need for government to accept responsibility for ensuring that the provisions that are in place are comprehensive and adequately resourced. To these ends, RIDBC contends that:

- Consideration *must* be given to how a comprehensive range of options can best be sustained, whether that be by government alone or in collaboration and cooperation with the non-government sector:
- Consideration should be given to how such provisions can be best made available to allow access to appropriately specialised services for students and families who are geographically removed from major centres of population.
- The curriculum for students who are deaf and hearing-impaired, regardless of placement, should be fundamentally the same as that for students without disabilities but with such varied instructional approaches and supports as may be required.

Technology

Various forms of technology are relevant to the needs of children who are deaf or hard of hearing. When used appropriately, such technology enhances the learning capabilities of students with hearing loss greatly.

As new technologies are incorporated into general education, it is imperative that these be made completely accessible to children who are deaf or hard of hearing.

- Children with hearing loss should be fitted as early as possible with appropriate assistive hearing technology (hearing aids and/or cochlear implants). To this end there is an emergent need to ensure that there is no diminution of the Commonwealth Government's commitment to the provision of free and universally available access to hearing services and hearing equipment under the terms of the current Hearing Services Program. This issue is particularly important in the context of the currently planned transition of the Commonwealth's Hearing Services Program to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) by 2019.
- All auditory-based/auditory dependent technologies that are used in schools should be made fully accessible as a matter of routine. Such access may include the use of captioning or the inclusion of sign language interpretation for all audio-visual materials used in the curriculum. Similarly, all instructional software should be accessible to children who are deaf or hard of hearing—that is, by ensuring that there are captions or sign language versions available, or that there are other visual analogues of all auditory information.

Personnel

- See specific comments and recommendations under Section 2.

1.2 Issues in providing support and equitable access for students who are blind or vision impaired

Children who are blind or vision impaired display a wide range of difficulties and varying adaptations to vision loss. For some children, blindness or vision impairment will be their only disability. However, for a large proportion, vision impairment will be only one of several identified disabilities (intellectual, physical, behavioural, or emotional) that will affect their learning.

The challenge for educational services for children who are blind or vision impaired, including those with additional disabilities, is to teach skills that sighted children typically acquire through vision. Students who are blind or vision impaired will use a variety of methods to learn to read, write, and acquire academic and non-academic skills. For reading, some students will use Braille exclusively, while others will rely on large print or regular print with low vision aids. Some may rely on computer-generated speech, while others have sufficient functional vision to use regular print. This diversity must be recognised and catered for by the education system. The process of teaching literacy to this group using Braille, alternative print formats, or adaptive technologies is a highly specialized task that requires highly specialized skills and interventions.

Specifically, this diversity and the need for comprehensive services for this group raise, among others, the following issues:

Early intervention and early childhood education

- Children and their families must be referred to an appropriate education program as soon as possible after diagnosis of a significant impairment of vision. Referral mechanisms and community awareness programs should ensure that this occurs.
- Family-centred early intervention for children who are blind or vision impaired and their families has proven to be an important component in the children's age-appropriate development. Ensuring that the transition to the NDIS does not compromise the network of services and the articulation of those services with school programs across all educational levels should be a priority for the Government.

Communication and Language

- Access to appropriate specialist teaching and other supports to ensure the development of literacy skills in the required/preferred medium is a critical consideration for blind and vision impaired students. Where the medium of instruction and learning is to be Braille then highly specialised interventions and teaching must be assured.
- Access to such educational services, whether they be specialised or wholly integrated, must include an assurance that instructional materials will be available to blind and vision impaired students in the appropriate media (Braille, large print, electronic format, etc.) at the same time as they are available to their sighted peers.
- There needs to be an assured supply of educational and recreational reading materials for students of all ages. To this end, appropriate funding and support for Braille and large print production agencies needs to be ensured.

Personnel

- It is critical to the success of educational programs for children who are blind or vision impaired that there be adequate provision of skilled and competent specialist staff across a range of categories: service managers, visiting and consulting teachers, orientation and mobility instructors, and technical support personnel.
- It is also critical that there be a critical mass of personnel who have adequate training in the production of Braille across all necessary codes (e.g., literary, mathematical, music).
- See also specific comments and recommendations under Section 2.

Adaptive technology

- Systems of funding adaptive aids and equipment for students who are blind or vision impaired that link the equipment to schools rather than students themselves are problematic for students who move between schools and, in particular, between service sectors. It is critical that consideration be given to a system of personalized funding for acquisition of at least some of the

technological equipment that children who are blind or vision impaired require to access the curriculum.

- Effective use of that technology by students can be achieved only if the necessary training is conducted. The current supply of teachers trained to instruct and support children who are blind/vision impaired is inadequate and the aging of the current workforce suggests an imminent danger of further diminution of capacity in all sectors. Competent use of technology at the earliest possible age benefits not only the students but results in considerable savings to school education and tertiary education providers.

2. Issues that pertain to the adequate preparation and deployment of specialised teaching and support staff to work with students with sensory disabilities

At issue here is the adequacy and accessibility of professional preparation programs for teachers of children with sensory disabilities.

The education of children with sensory disabilities requires a range of specialist professional skills and knowledge that goes significantly beyond that required of either teachers in regular educational environments or specialists in other areas of special or inclusive education.

In regard to the education of children who are deaf or hard of hearing, for example, requisite specialist skills and knowledge include, among others, the following:

- Knowledge of appropriate assessment, diagnosis, and evaluation methods and instruments;
- Comprehensive understanding of expressive and receptive language development and language-specific pedagogies for supporting acquisition of either (or both) spoken and signed language;
- Detailed knowledge of audiological interventions including the effective operation and utilization of hearing aids, cochlear implants, and other assistive listening devices;
- Detailed knowledge of a range of audiological conditions such as auditory neuropathy spectrum disorder, and the associated habilitation and educational correlates of those conditions;
- Detailed knowledge of acoustic phonetics and speech perception as a basis for teaching speech and listening skills associated with acquisition of oral language;
- High levels of facility with at least one of a wide range of possible educational methodologies which vary according to the mode of communication and language of instruction (spoken or signed) that is used with children who are deaf or hard of hearing;
- Detailed knowledge and appreciation of cultural, historical, emotional, social, legal, and educational issues in hearing loss and deafness;
- Highly effective communication skills (including sign language skills to a high level for teachers working with children who use that mode of communication); and

- Understanding of appropriate educational programming, classroom/behavioral management, and curriculum development for this population.

Similarly, for teachers of children who are blind or vision impaired requisite specialist skills and knowledge include, among others, the following:

- Detailed knowledge of vision assessment strategies and associated reporting formats and terminology;
- Functional knowledge of optical interventions including the effective operation and utilization of a range of low vision aids and devices;
- Functional knowledge of a wide range of technologies for providing access to print-based materials for students who are blind or vision impaired ;
- Effective skills in the production of Braille;
- Working knowledge of orientation and mobility instruction strategies and techniques;
- Knowledge of appropriate assessment, diagnosis, and evaluation methods and instruments;
- Understanding of appropriate educational programming, classroom/behavioral management and curriculum development for this population;
- Direct practical experience with children who are blind or vision impaired, including those with multiple disabilities, in a range of educational settings.

Programs to provide this level of professional preparation are highly specialised and demand high levels of resources for effective delivery. However, hearing impairment and vision impairment are low-incidence conditions and the number of teachers who require such professional training is correspondingly low.

In recent years, there has been a number of concerning trends in the provision of professional preparation in these areas and, also, in the requirements of employers (particularly at the school education level) for teachers who work with children with sensory disabilities to have such qualifications.

Against this backdrop of decreasing requirements for specialist teachers to hold appropriate qualifications, the knowledge and skill base required of teachers who are to work with students who are deaf and hard of hearing or blind and vision impaired has increased dramatically. International experience indicates that the specialist skills required to operate effectively as a teacher of children with sensory disabilities cannot be adequately covered in the context of a generic special education program (even with some limited specialist input) and cannot be adequately covered in a specialist program with too few hours of appropriate coursework. Effective professional training in this area should continue to be a one-year program of highly specialised full-time equivalent study.

Appropriately specialised professional training for teachers of the deaf and teachers of children who are blind or vision impaired is extremely resource-intensive with appropriately low-level demand. In order to sustain this provision and to ensure that quality programming is made available and accessible nationally, there is a need to ensure that there is workforce of specialist support

teachers (in both hearing loss and vision impairment) who have been specifically and effectively trained to work in that capacity.

Reliance on generic training in special education for support teachers or generalised training in inclusive practice for classroom teachers cannot, alone, account for the provision of appropriate interventions for students with sensory disabilities in regular education and certainly cannot provide the types of specialist intervention skills required for teachers working in support classes or special school programs for children with sensory disabilities. Training for teachers of children with other disabling conditions cannot be considered as a substitute for such requisite specialised training.

3. Issues that pertain to funding of specialised supports in the independent school sector

The majority of children with sensory disabilities are educated in regular educational environments—typically with significant (often very high) levels of additional special educational support.

It is evident, however, that students with sensory disabilities are not proportionally represented across the government and non-government sectors of the education system.

Both state and federal governments have reinforced the commitment to the availability of parental choice between the government and non-government sectors for schooling. However, in spite of the legal and educational imperatives (including case law concerning disability discrimination), there remains a question about whether the choice of a non-government school is a viable and supported option for all children with sensory disabilities.

According to community standards, the cost of “choosing” a non-government school education is met in part by the parents of each student, and in part by the Australian tax-paying community. The contribution by Governments (State and Commonwealth) to the education of a student in a non-government school is related to the average cost of educating a student in regular schools and which does take into account the systemic costs associated with the education of children with disabilities. However, independent schools are not part of a system and therefore do not have the capacity to average costs over a large number of students or to move funds between schools to compensate for low incidence of students with specific disabilities across a system. Funding of specific interventions for students with particular disabilities are therefore often disproportionate to the budget of an individual independent school and claims of unjustifiable hardship in making such provisions can often be sustained.

Independent special schools do receive additional funding but in many cases, such as the situation of the special schools operated by RIDBC, such schools are educating students that require very specialised teaching and have the highest support needs.

Since the removal of the Commonwealth's Capital grants program, independent schools have found it even more difficult to provide often high levels of equipment needs for students with sensory disabilities to access their schools and the curriculum. Prior to this, schools were able to apply for a contribution to the costs of school modifications and pieces of equipment to assist students with a disability to access the curriculum.

The majority of the recurrent funding that independent schools receive is from the Commonwealth government and is based on the general per capita grants (i.e., based on student enrolments) plus the additional per capita grants for students with disabilities both in regular and special schools.

The NSW government provides three main forms of funding to independent schools:

- Per capita grants based on enrolments
- Interest subsidy scheme
- Supervisor Subsidy Scheme.

The Supervisor subsidy scheme only supports schools to cater for students with moderate to severe disabilities and autism. This provides a subsidy to schools towards teachers' salaries. This scheme is vital for special schools to sustain the class sizes that are appropriate for those students to gain a high quality and education and ensure teacher and student safety in many cases. The Supervisor subsidy requires an overhaul and consideration should be given to the groups to which the subsidy applies. Funding for students with disabilities should be allocated on a functional needs basis and not based on a disability diagnosis.

With the introduction of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) more students than ever have been identified across all schools sectors as having a disability. A diagnosis of a disability is not enough to provide an allocated amount of money to support a student. All students are individual and the functional impact of their particular disabilities will vary greatly and thus so will the educational needs of the student. The NCCD captures the category of disability and the level of adjustment that a student requires, however this is based on teacher professional judgement which has been found not to be consistent between schools and sectors. The basis of the data collection was to look at what is offered as part of the core school programme and then what further adjustments students require above and beyond this. For some students in well-resourced and supported schools the level of adjustment would be significantly lower than those that are in other schools.

It is acknowledged that that there is an important and rightful role and responsibility for any school to provide the infrastructure necessary to support a student with a disability within their school program. However, it would appear an inequitable imposition upon a single independent school to have to bear the full cost of such provisions as a basis for providing equitable access to its programs by a student with a disability, when it is considered that government has determined that it will subsidise students without disabilities to an average level of approximately 50% of those operational costs—and often much more.

Perhaps more importantly, it seems unfair and out of keeping with the “spirit” of the DDA for governments to administer a funding mechanism that is sufficiently inadequate to routinely allow any school—government or non-government—to be able to mount a successful defence of “unjustifiable hardship” when students with complex and costly support needs seek to enrol.

The latter issue seems particularly unfair and inequitable when government is actively promoting access to non-government schools through subsidy (funding) mechanisms that benefit non-disabled students and encourage their participation in this sector. If it is accepted that Australian schoolchildren with disabilities ought to have the same opportunity and choice in schooling as other Australian school students, then a number of changes might be constructive.

The most desirable system would be one that met the actual costs of additional support for students with disabilities on an equitable basis in both government and non-government schools. Consistent with the precepts of the Gonski review of school funding, a strong social policy argument can be mounted to suggest that this should be the same in both cases, and should seek to meet the actual costs of accommodations to support the access and support needs of students with disabilities. At the very least, the proportion of the actual costs met in the case of non-government schools should be no less than the proportion of the cost of a non-disabled student’s education which is currently met by government.

A funding review is essential to further enable schools to meet their obligations under the Disability Standards for Education 2005 to make reasonable adjustments to assist students with disability to access and participate in education on the same basis as their peers.

4. Recommendations

Based on the consideration of issues raised in the previous sections, Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children (RIDBC) makes the following specific recommendations to The Inquiry. RIDBC commends these recommendations to the Standing Committee and would be pleased to have the opportunity to elaborate on each in the context of evidence provided to the Inquiry in person.

4.1 Recommendation 1

That Government should take such steps as are necessary to ensure a comprehensive continuum of program options for children who are deaf or hard of hearing (i.e., ranging from separate schools or support classes to fully inclusive regular school environments). Having noted this requirement, RIDBC acknowledges that not all options need to be made available within all sectors of the education system (i.e., government and non-government). Rather, there is a need for government to accept responsibility for ensuring that service provisions are comprehensive and adequately resourced across all sectors. To these ends, RIDBC recommends that:

- Consideration be given to how a comprehensive range of options can best be sustained, whether that is by government alone or in collaboration and cooperation with organisations in the non-government sector such as RIDBC; and

- Consideration be given to how such provisions can best be made available to ensure there is access to appropriately specialised services for students who are geographically removed from major centres of population. To this end, collaborative endeavours to ensure access through innovative methods of tele-practice will be imperative to serve the needs of this low incidence group.

Similarly, it is recommended that consideration be given to how the government and the non-government sectors can better collaborate and innovate to provide comprehensive and accessible educational services for students who are blind or vision impaired in all locations—particularly rural and regional locations—through tele-practice.

4.2 Recommendation 2

Given that children with hearing loss should be fitted as early as possible with appropriate assistive hearing technology (hearing aids and/or cochlear implants) there is an emergent need to ensure that there is no diminution of the Commonwealth Government's commitment to the provision of free and universally available access to hearing services and hearing equipment under the terms of the current Hearing Services Program. These services underpin the capability of the education system for deaf and hard of hearing students at all levels of the education system.

Given the currently planned transition of the Commonwealth's Hearing Services Program to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), The New South Wales Government should urge the Commonwealth Government to ensure that there is no diminution in the scope or regional availability of the services currently offered under the Hearing Services Program.

4.3 Recommendation 3

That the Government, through the Department of Education, takes such steps as are necessary to ensure the requirement that all auditory-dependent technologies that are used in schools should be made fully accessible to students with hearing loss as a matter of obligation. Such access may include the use of captioning or the inclusion of sign language interpretation for all audio-visual materials used in the curriculum. Similarly, all instructional software should be guaranteed to be accessible to students who are deaf or hard of hearing by ensuring that there are captions or sign language versions available.

4.4 Recommendation 4

That the Government takes such steps as are necessary to ensure that:

- Students who are blind or vision impaired have access to appropriate specialist teaching and other supports to guarantee the development of their literacy skills in their required/preferred medium (i.e., Braille or other alternative format). Where the medium of access is Braille then highly specialised interventions and teaching must be assured for all students regardless of their geographic location or educational level;
- Access to such educational support services, whether they be additional to or wholly integrated within a school program, must include an assurance that instructional materials will be available to blind and vision impaired students in

their required medium (i.e., Braille, large print, electronic format, etc.) at the same time as they are available to their sighted peers;

- All vision-dependent technologies and print materials that are used in schools should be fully accessible to students with vision impairment as a matter of obligation; and
- There needs to be an assured supply of educational and recreational reading materials for students of all ages. To this end, appropriate funding and support for Braille and large print production agencies needs to be ensured across all educational sectors—government and non-government.

4.5 Recommendation 5

That the Inquiry Report makes recommendations concerning the assurance of adequate levels of government funding to provide support for the integration of students with disabilities, regardless of whether those students attend government or non-government schools.

4.6 Recommendation 6

That the Inquiry Report makes recommendations concerning: (a) the need to ensure a nexus between appropriate qualification and the deployment of teachers to work with the population of children with sensory disabilities in early education, preschool, and school environments; (b) the assurance of appropriate levels of government funding to provide for the ongoing provision of highly specialised teacher training for teachers of children with sensory disabilities, and (c) the need for government to fund mechanisms for ensuring that teachers are encouraged to undertake such training (e.g., through funded scholarships/assistantships or the encouragement of use of Commonwealth Supported Places for teachers such studies within the University system).