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SENATE

EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION REFERENCES COMMITTEE

(SUBCOMMITTEE)

Reference: Education of students with disabilities

MONDAY, 12 AUGUST 2002

MELBOURNE

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SENATE

EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Monday, 12 August 2002

Members: Senator George Campbell *(Chair)*, Senator Tierney *(Deputy Chair)*, Senators Barnett, Carr, Crossin and Stott Despoja

Participating members: Senators Abetz, Boswell, Buckland, Calvert, Chapman, Cherry, Jacinta Collins, Coonan, Denman, Eggleston, Chris Evans, Faulkner, Ferguson, Ferris, Forshaw, Harradine, Harris, Hutchins, Knowles, Lightfoot, Ludwig, Mason, McGauran, Murphy, Nettle, Payne, Sherry and Watson

Senators in attendance: Senator Carr *(Subcommittee Chair)* and Senator Tierney

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

The education of students with disabilities, including learning disabilities, throughout all levels and sectors of education, with particular reference to:

a) whether current policies and programs for students with disabilities are adequate to meet their education needs, including, but not limited to:

i) the criteria used to define disability and to differentiate between levels of handicap,

ii) the accuracy with which students' disability related needs are being assessed,

iii) the particular needs of students with disabilities from low socio-economic, non-English speaking and Indigenous backgrounds and from rural and remote areas,

iv) the effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs,

v) access to and adequacy of funding and support in both the public and private sectors,

vi) the nature, extent and funding of programs that provide for full or partial learning opportunities with mainstream students,

vii) teacher training and professional development, and;

viii) the legal implications and resource demands of current Commonwealth and state and territory legislation

b) what the proper role of the Commonwealth and states and territories should be in supporting the education of students with disabilities.

WITNESSES

DUZEN, Mrs Halime, Turkish Carers Group Facilitator, ADEC, through Mr Atef Ibrahim, interpreter....................193

ELGUINDY, Mrs Laila, ADEC Carer Group and ADEC Community....................193

FATHERS, Mr Martin Keith, Chair, Education Working Party, Disability Advisory Council of Victoria....................207

FRAWLEY, Ms Patsie, Executive Officer, Disability Advisory Council of Victoria....................207

KILLEY, Mrs Christine, Coordinator, SPELD Learning Centre....................218

LACEY, Mr Damian Lyons, Chief Executive Officer, USDC Services for Deaf Children....................193

McKENZIE, Mrs Margaret Mary, Parent of learning disability child, SPELD Learning Centre....................218

MORRISON, Mr Robert Hector (Private capacity)....................193

TAFFE, Mrs Cristina Veronica (Private capacity)....................193

Subcommittee met at 2.41 p.m.

DUZEN, Mrs Halime, Turkish Carers Group Facilitator, ADEC, through Mr Atef Ibrahim, interpreter

ELGUINDY, Mrs Laila, ADEC Carer Group and ADEC Community

LACEY, Mr Damian Lyons, Chief Executive Officer, USDC Services for Deaf Children

MORRISON, Mr Robert Hector (Private capacity)

TAFFE, Mrs Cristina Veronica (Private capacity)

CHAIR—Before we commence taking evidence today, I wish to state for the record that all witnesses appearing before the committee are protected by parliamentary privilege with respect to their evidence. Parliamentary privilege refers to the special rights and immunities attached to the parliament or its members and others necessary for the discharge of parliamentary functions without obstruction or fear of prosecution. Any act by any person which disadvantages a witness on account of evidence given before the Senate or any of its committee is a breach of privilege.

I welcome all witnesses and observers to this public hearing. The committee has submissions numbered 127, 208 and 234. Are there any changes or corrections that any of you would like to make to any of those submissions? If not, I will go on. The committee prefers all evidence to be given in public although the committee would also consider any request for all or part of your evidence to be given confidentially. I point out that such evidence may subsequently be made public by order of the Senate. I now invite each of you to make an opening statement.

Mr Morrison—I am the father of a profoundly deaf son. He is a deaf boy born into a hearing family so he has had to face communication problems straight away because we do not have the skills. In regard to the terms of reference for this hearing, I feel it is more important to have equal access to the curriculum rather than to work out the funding issues. With funding, it is either going to be now and paid up front or else it is on welfare later if you do not educate them. So it is one way or the other and it is still going to be on the public purse. If they do not have access to the curriculum they are not going to be able to succeed in life.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Mrs Taffe—Thank you for this opportunity. I am a parent, as I said, of a deaf signing child who lives in Wodonga. I have read Mr Morrison’s submission and I can relate to all that he has written and I agree with what he has said. I speak in relation to the education of deaf signing children who use Auslan—that is, the Australian sign language—as their first language. They are being educated bilingually. They are learning English through their first language and that English could either be read, written or, in some cases, spoken as well. Deafness is a disability of communication. A high level of special support is required to educate a deaf child and, undoubtedly, that is really expensive.

I would like to briefly recap my submission addressing the terms of reference related to teacher training and professional development. I think there are two main issues that negatively impact on the quality of education currently available to signing deaf children in Victoria. Firstly, the current system of training for teachers of the deaf through Melbourne University does not provide for a quality teacher who is able to teach both the oral deaf child and the signing deaf child. The emphasis is certainly towards the oral mode of education. These teacher of the deaf graduates are unable to communicate or teach a child, such as my own, beyond a very rudimentary level due to the minimal signing component of their course. What we are seeing are graduates coming out of university who are unable to sign. They are unable to teach deaf children because they are unable to communicate with them beyond a very basic level. It is obviously paramount that teachers of deaf signing children be fluent users of the first language of that child which is Auslan.

The second major impediment to accessing education for deaf signing children is the lack of qualified Auslan interpreters employed in the school setting. The deaf signing child in this situation is denied quality language role modelling in their first language. This impacts decidedly on their reception of information and their ability to translate their thoughts into another language such as English. I understand that few Auslan interpreters are willing to work in schools as they are paid so poorly. A more favourable remuneration would definitely help address this problem. Therefore, I feel that these two areas, the current system of teacher of the deaf training in Victoria and a lack of qualified Auslan interpreters in schools, need to be addressed urgently. Currently, deaf signing children are not being provided with equal access to education so promised by the government.

I can relate to the above because the local school that my son is currently attending advertised for a qualified Auslan interpreter and the response was nil. The school was good enough to also advertise for a teacher of the deaf with fluent Auslan skills and we were also unable to attract anybody for that position. Our family is more or less always thinking, ‘Will it be better if we move to a city?’ Our family is continually thinking, ‘Is it going to be that much better if we totally relocate our family and move to the city to find better services?’ Sometimes I wonder whether services are any better in the city.

CHAIR—Quite a few points have arisen from your presentation and we will need to come back to those in a moment.

Mrs Taffe—I would be happy to.

Mrs Duzen—Thank you for the opportunity to talk to you today. I grew up in Turkey and I have been in Australia for 15 years. I am a disabled person; I have muscular dystrophy and my muscles are dying. When I came to Australia as a non-English speaking background person I considered myself disabled—deaf, blind and brainless—because I did not talk and I did not hear what they were saying. I started work as a factory process worker. Because of my lack of physical power I had to leave and then I became a pensioner on a disability pension. I could not stay at home and do nothing so I successfully applied to study at university. I also started to work as a volunteer.

When I started university, I could not find a parking spot. There were no parking spots for disabled persons. There were not enough elevators. The big building has A and B block but we had to go to J block. I had to walk. I used to spend a lot of time walking distances. The second issue is that I did not have the chance to use the library because there were no elevators. The steps were very high and because the handrails were very thick I could not grip them nicely. As a person from a non-English speaking background I did not have the confidence to ask for support from the school. I did not know what to do and how to get support. When I came to Australia and went to the doctor I said I had a headache. I had to ask him to get information. I do not have information. I gave examples to the doctor and then the doctor could understand my situation. People from non-English speaking backgrounds do not have the self-esteem and confidence to approach, talk and get information. Working with disabled people in ADEC and the deaf and blind association in the last seven years I have found people from non-English speaking backgrounds and their parents cannot approach the organisations because of a lack of confidence and English. I am here to support the ADEC submission.

CHAIR—Thank you very much.

Mrs Elguindy—First of all, I would like to thank you for hearing about disabled people and care givers and devoting your time to know some of the unknown aspects of their lives. You will get to know some of the aspects and the suffering that both the disabled individual and their families are going through. I would like you to take into consideration the number of problems that we are going through and help us find some solutions to alleviate such suffering for us and the next generation as well as anybody who is going through the same problems. I consider myself lucky because I have got to know ADEC. ADEC has given me the opportunity to be here today to express my personal experience unlike hundreds of cases that have not got the opportunity to express their problems. By attending here I will be able to express my problem which might be similar to thousands of other cases that have not been able to attend and give evidence to the committee today. I am prepared to answer any queries or questions that may be asked of me today. Thank you.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. It is really important for citizens of this country to tell the parliament what is going on in their lives. It helps us to understand the way in which our legislation and our administration are actually working. I want to thank you all very much for coming today to help us in our work. We hope that we can help you by perhaps providing you with a broader audience for the matters that you have experienced and by perhaps providing some policy options for the government to work on in the future. Mr Morrison, I am wondering if you could explain to us how you have seen the response of the education systems to the particular needs that you have faced. Have you found that the education department officials have been helpful?

Mr Morrison—Perhaps if I talk about early intervention first, I have nothing but praise for the body that looked after us. But as soon as we moved on, that was it—crunch, finished—and the case was moved on to someone else. There was no integration or flow on; they basically said, ‘See you later.’ You see them a lot later on, but right at that time, when you are moving and feeling vulnerable, you are dropped and you have a new person as your caretaker. That is one of the issues where there needs to be an overriding body over the whole education side.

As far as the mainstream goes, we went to our school where we have a daughter who is hearing. The principal there was very supportive and said, ‘Yes, we are quite happy for your boy to come to our school.’ They indicated that they had specialist teachers at the school, but none of them had Auslan. They indicated that the $18,000 would be used to engage someone with those skills, but that still meant only a third of the time would be covered. For the other two-thirds, our son would have to fend for himself. We moved away from that. We are lucky to live in Melbourne because there is a viable option here, which is the Victorian College of the Deaf. We have other issues there but they are more on the curriculum side. It does not matter which stream you go down, there are always issues that you need to look at.

CHAIR—How did you know which options were available to you? Did anyone ever sit down and go through all the options that were available or did you have to hunt down all the alternatives?

Mr Morrison—From the outset, when our son was diagnosed, my wife knew someone else who had a deaf child and she asked them about early intervention services. I did not know they existed because I did not need them, until that stage. They suggested that we go to Monnington, which we did. That was basically our decision.

CHAIR—So there was no-one in the education department whom you felt you could go to?

Mr Morrison—I would say I was probably naive, really. We went to someone who knew, who had been somewhere, and we said, ‘We will go that way.’ There were only four centres in the state. We could have gone to Ripponlea or somewhere down that way, but Monnington was closer to us—it was a location thing as well—so we decided to go that way. As far as integration schooling goes, we tried integration with our boy in kindergarten, as well as sending him to PEJ, which is a specialist school with a kindergarten for deaf children. We sent him to our local kindergarten because we wanted him to have local mates. There were issues there about defining how disabled a deaf child is.

The example I have put in my submission is of a little blind boy who went to the same kindergarten as Ben. He was assessed by the criteria of the day as requiring an assistant at kindergarten and Ben was assessed as not requiring one. Within probably one to two sessions, the kindergarten teacher came back to us and said, ‘We have a gross number of issues here. He becomes disruptive because he is bored once they start reading.’ As far as he is concerned, they are just moving their mouths. In the playground, if he starts to climb a tree, you cannot yell out to him, ‘Come down!’ You actually have to go and get him. As far as the school side of it goes, as I said, we went to the local school and walked away from it. We thought, ‘A third of the curriculum is not good enough.’

CHAIR—Mrs Taffe, did you find there was anyone you could turn to to get advice within the education department?

Mrs Taffe—Certainly we had to seek out information; we had to be very active about finding information. When my son was two I was thinking about his preschool and schooling, being out in the country area, and organising meetings with the regional director of education and meetings with people from Human Services, because there was a bit of a dilemma about which department was actually responsible in the preschool setting for the education of a deaf child. Firstly, we were told that three-year-old kinder is not funded, and that was supposed to be the end of that. There is no funding, there is no support for a three-year-old child who is profoundly deaf. It could not be further from the truth that a child who is deaf needs lots of intervention. So we just persevered. As I was saying, the Department of Human Services told us to see the regional director of education and the regional director of education told us to go to Human Services. We could not really get them to sit together in a room and say—

CHAIR—How did you make those decisions about the education of your child? What advice were you able to call upon?

Mrs Taffe—We did lots of research ourselves. In the end the regional manager did take some responsibility for giving us support in three-year-old and four-year-old preschool. But it was very stressful for our family being told, ‘It is not us, it is them.’ There are incredible delays when you write letters. What do you do with your child, just mark time? We were fortunate in that there was a teacher of the deaf in Benalla, an hour and a quarter away from my home, and another family and I travelled to have our boys together so that they could socialise together. It seemed to be a little bit more possible if there was more than one child. At quite an expense to ourselves we bypassed 20 local preschools to go to one where we could have socialisation with another child, and that teacher of the deaf was willing, through the department of education, to give us some support. But it was really difficult. We had to virtually seek out the information and say it was not good enough. When the regional director said, ‘We step in when your boy is five,’ I said, ‘What do I do now? What do I do with my boy for three and four?’ Should we just do nothing with him or continue with the statewide intervention service called Monnington? I thought they were very good in the early stages educating and supporting us and empowering parents to help us with our decisions. Then it became very difficult. When it was time for us to move on, what do we do?

CHAIR—Thank you for that. Mrs Duzen, how did you go in the end? Which university were you able to enrol in?

Mrs Duzen—I do not want to say publicly.

CHAIR—You do not have to.

Mrs Duzen—Monash University.

CHAIR—Was there anyone at Monash University that you could turn to to get assistance?

Mrs Duzen—I did, after a couple of years. I had lots of difficulties because of the parking. You can walk a five-minute distance but for me it is more than 10 or 15 minutes. I had to approach them because of trouble I was having. They could not find any solution for the car parking. For the library we do have an elevator, but it was always locked. They used that elevator just to carry books, not for the students. I did approach them after two years because of the self-confidence I had got.

I have worked for ADEC for the last 15 months and I came across a couple of parents who are having a lot of difficulties because they do not know what mental health services are available to their children, especially when they finish normal school. They think there is no opportunity for their children to improve their skills for employment. There is a big struggle for people in the mental health area too.

CHAIR—You are drawing to our attention two separate sets of problems, which are compounded when they are put together, obviously—that is, a physical disability and an English language disability. How often do you think those two occur together?

Mrs Duzen—Take my case, for example. When you are physically disabled and at the same time you do not have language skills, you cannot cry for help. You do not know how to approach people, you cannot say what you want to say and you do not know what sort of services are out there. Your disability becomes—

CHAIR—So the points that have been made by Mrs Taffe and Mr Morrison are much worse for you—not only do you have trouble finding someone, you have trouble actually telling someone that you need help.

Mrs Duzen—Definitely. Consider what it would be like if you had a disability. If you went to Turkey and you had a disability and you did not know the language or the culture, what would you do?

CHAIR—Mrs Elguindy, I understand your son has an intellectual disability.

Mrs Elguindy—He has Down syndrome.

CHAIR—Can you tell us something about the experience you have had with your son? We understand there was no written submission so we have no information about your circumstances. Can you tell the committee, briefly, what has been the nature of your experience?

Mrs Elguindy—It is very hard to be brief but I will try my best. First of all, the schools—that is, the teachers—are unqualified to teach intellectually disabled individuals. They do not have the patience. When these teachers are employed in such a situation they are not actually qualified for the task. The reality is that they are not really trained to deal with the expected behaviour of an intellectually disabled individual. The written programs do not, in reality, lead to practical experience. They might think the intellectually disabled child, with his lack of speech, is incapable of understanding issues in general and that will give them an apathetic attitude towards such a child.

My child is a Down syndrome child. He is 18 years old now. I am going through a time now with the integration teacher and the coordinator of his program. My son has been at high school for nearly three years now and I can say that he has not really acquired any skills or anything. On the contrary his condition has been deteriorating by the day. When we normally do the preliminary interview prior to enrolling him they ask me, ‘What do you want to teach your child?’ and normally such interviews are really very amicable interviews. But the things I got from the introductory session do not compare with reality at all. I will give you a few examples.

My child was in a mainstream school initially—during his primary schooling, and he remained for another two years as well. I was advised to put him into a special school for a program called 15 plus. Of course I enrolled my son in such a program. It was really a very good program but my son was enrolled in a group of other children who could not speak at all. Some of them have other skills like communicating using cards but most of them have not been able to talk. My son was able to talk a bit. So I realised that the condition of my son was not improving but deteriorating. He started to be isolated. He started to trip. He came back with a scratched face and some facial injuries as a result of being in a fight with other kids as a result of the lack of linguistic communication between them. The condition of these kids has really deteriorated. My son does not have the appropriate level needed for his care.

I put him in a secondary school for a couple of days a week, and for the other three days in a special school. I started to feel that my son no longer wanted to go to the special school; he wanted to go to the secondary school instead. My disaster and dilemma with the coordinator of this program began when I asked her if my son would be able to attend on a full-time basis. Initially she started to mistreat me personally in front of the other students and teachers if my son had misbehaved in some way. I will give you some other examples. One day my son sneezed. She wrote to me in the diary that he had sneezed and it had splattered on one of the teacher's aides there. She wrote that she would send me the teacher's aide's jacket 'so you can get it cleaned and return it to us'.

That program was supposed to be ready for my son when he was able to start his schooling. Initially, she told me that the program had been written schematically on scrap paper. This happened in the presence of Human Services, the principal, my husband and I and an aide as well. I waited for six months for the program but there was no answer, so I approached them again and spoke to the headmistress. The principal's response was 'Mrs Elguindy, I am too busy for your son's problem. I've had meetings every day and I haven't had any time to finish the program.' That is exactly the way she spoke to me. I said, 'I don't need to see the program on paper. Sit with me for half an hour and tell me about the program.' She said that she would send it to me, but up to now I have not received anything from her.

She started to make complaints about my son's behaviour. I have never experienced a teacher with such an unsympathetic nature as this teacher had. One of the complaints she put to me was that my son used to open the classroom door and venture out. I investigated this example—because I know that my son would not do anything unless it was a reaction to something else—and I found out that my son had been harassed by two other kids in the same classroom. I can give you more examples.

CHAIR—We have probably got the idea of it. Is your experience in a government or a non-government school?

Mrs Elguindy—A government school.

CHAIR—In the government system there are supposed to be opportunities for parents to talk to more senior people outside of the school. Did you have that?

Mrs Elguindy—I went everywhere. I went to Human Services. They went to DISTSS for me, but she did not even respect the ruling of DISTSS—she refused it. They gave her a list for him saying, for example, that he could only concentrate for 10 minutes, so after that they should give him a break and then continue. Her answer to DISTSS was, 'No, he must stay in his class for half an hour like everyone else.' Eventually, DISTSS could not do anything with her, so they told me, 'It's in your best interests to transfer your son from such a school.'

The second point I need to refer to is that the program of this principal was poor to the point that my son has been deteriorating, as I mentioned before. I met with one of the education department officers later on, and she told me that the program that has been set up for my son is very poor and that he will not get any benefit out of it. She started to initiate a new program instead. But I felt, throughout my experience with this school, that the principal has not really been the coordinator of this program; she has not been accommodating or respecting the presence of my son in her program nor the parental involvement. I used to receive my son with bruises all over his body after he came back from such a program. She was the one who lodged the complaint to me that he had done something wrong. My son used to tell me who caused such bruises to him, but she used to deny that such a thing had been happening; at one point she even denied the name of the other child who had been accused of causing such incidents. This incident has been repeated again in the presence of people from the Department of Human Services and the principal.

CHAIR—Senator Tierney and I would share a similar concern about this matter. Would it be possible to get some details from you? We could make inquiries of the education department, who are coming to see us tomorrow.

Mrs Elguindy—In actual fact, I have another meeting here tomorrow. I can stay for more time.

CHAIR—That is our problem: we do not have enough time. We would like you to give some information to the secretary, and Senator Tierney and I will raise the matter tomorrow with the officials who are coming to see us. What part of Melbourne do you live in?

Mrs Elguindy—I live in the west.

CHAIR—That is fine; we are going to see the right person tomorrow. That is why I asked the question.

Mrs Elguindy—I want to say that I did not mean those complaints as complaints; I meant that I wish that these people would deal with disabled people and their carers professionally. Not professional by experience: do not tell me that, because you have a child with Down syndrome, you can deal with a deaf person, a physically disabled person or any other disabled person. There must be a course. Before anything, they do it as a job and get money from the job, it must be from the heart. The heart of these people! Because these people work with our children, they make our children frustrated and they make us feel sick.

We already have problems. We do not need more problems. We do not need people to treat us like this, and because I do not speak good English does not mean I am dumb. Because my son does not speak or he cannot look after himself they can do what they want. I have been told by one of the head teachers, ‘Shut your mouth, Laila. Do not talk.’ You do not know what can happen to your son when you are not there. My son used to tell me a boy took him to the toilet and harmed him. When I said that they put my son in the disabled toilet, they never listened to me. That is not fair. What do they expect of a human being? It is not fair. It does not mean that because I do not speak English and I do not know everything that I am dumb. That is the goal in my family. I am sorry.

Senator TIERNEY—Could I ask Mr Morrison to clarify a little further the distinction that you made as key issues on curriculum and funding? You seem to be indicating that funding will pretty much take care of itself, and we should focus on curriculum. I am just wondering if you are coming from the perspective of someone in a specialist school to say that? It would seem to me, as we have just heard, in mainstream schools that funding seems to be a pretty critical issue as well.

Mr Morrison—Maybe I have misinterpreted it there. I am just saying that you are going to have to have the funding, whether you spend it now or later on, because they will be on welfare if they cannot get access to an education. It is going to be there and it will be tenfold. It will be a one, 10, 1,000 situation as you go further down the track. If you do not teach them when they first start—

Senator TIERNEY—And you do not want that.

Mr Morrison—Basically what I am looking at is access to the curriculum. With a deaf child, unless you have signing for the whole of the actual curriculum, you are going to miss out on something. Therefore, you are not getting equal access to the curriculum that is available for today. That is a pretty good recipe for disaster as far as that child goes. No-one is guaranteed of getting a job these days when they get full access to the curriculum. What chance does a kid have when they do not have it?

Senator TIERNEY—So your full access is by the method of teaching through signing. Is that the key problem?

Mr Morrison—That is his language.

Senator TIERNEY—This is a problem that Mrs Taffe is bringing up as well, in terms of the way teachers are trained?

Mr Morrison—It is not to do with the teacher's training. If they are going into a mainstream school through inclusion they have to be included. With the process as it is at the moment, and the way they get assessed, they would get funding for one-third of the curriculum. There is two-thirds of that curriculum where they have to fend for themselves.

Senator TIERNEY—What are you saying? Is the actual specialist assistance only for what areas in the curriculum in that one-third you are referring to?

Mr Morrison—That is the other thing; the schools are not directed in what they have to do with that funding. They can put it into anything. They just get a grant allocated for the disability level and this is how much money they get. We would assume that they were getting it because, say, our son was going there and that it would be directed towards an Auslan aide because that is what he basically needs. He does not need anybody to show him where the toilet is; he can get there by himself. But he does need someone to interpret what is being said.

Senator TIERNEY—So on your assessment of your particular case, that is only occurring in about one-third of the school work that he is doing.

Mr Morrison—No, I cannot say that that is happening in one-third of his school work. All I am saying is that the funding allocated to kids who are profoundly deaf who require a full-time language interpreter is only $18,000, which is about one-third of an assistant’s wage.

Senator TIERNEY—So in an ideal world they would get three times the assistance?

Mr Morrison—Yes. I do not expect it to be ideal.

Senator TIERNEY—We are just trying to assess the level of support compared to what is needed. Thank you very much for clarifying that. In a related way, Mrs Taffe, you referred to the training of teachers of the deaf. You might want to clarify this, but you seem to be indicating that in their training they were not covering the particular area that would assist your child. Could you explain that further?

Mrs Taffe—Certainly. As far as I understand it, the Melbourne University teacher of the deaf training course—

Senator TIERNEY—Is that the only one in Victoria?

Mrs Taffe—I believe so. When they finish their teacher of the deaf course the graduates have had a very minimal component of their course devoted to Auslan sign language. So we have a qualified teacher of the deaf unable to communicate with a child such as my own; the training system is thoroughly inadequate. Most of the course is more biased towards the oral stream—that is, children who are less deaf than our children and who do not use sign language. I am speaking as a parent of a deaf signing child and I am looking at his education and the teacher training for the people who will be educating him. The teachers cannot communicate with him unless, in their own time, they learn the full language.

CHAIR—Your submission, No. 234, is actually signed off by your husband, Richard.

Mrs Taffe—There are two submissions.

CHAIR—I raise that simply because in your household there would be access to considerable expertise, I would have thought, on a professional basis as well as your own direct experience and yet you are having trouble navigating the system.

Mrs Taffe—Definitely.

CHAIR—How do ordinary, less well-equipped people cope with it?

Mrs Taffe—I can answer that. In my submission I said that a lot of people in rural areas just accept whatever they are told, such as, ‘Sorry, there is no funded preschool for three-year-olds,’ to which they might say, ‘Oh well, that is the way it is.’ A professional may suggest that the child go down one path and the parent might just say, ‘Yes, okay, that is what we will do.’ A lot of people accept things. We certainly have not accepted all the advice we have been given along the way; I have questioned lots of it. A lot of that questioning has come through my husband’s knowledge of the education system, his study in general and his study of linguistics—all those sorts of things.

Basically, we understood fairly early in the piece that a child as deaf as our own needed to access information not through his voice or audition but his hands. That is a very specialised skill. We thought we could learn sign and we are endeavouring to communicate and learn as much Auslan as we can. But it is not only about us; it is about having fluent teachers who have a similar skill or who have a better skill than we have. It is actually very difficult for us to learn Auslan because there are very limited resources in the country. I have been in the country for six years now, and in my local area the furthest I can go is just a basic introductory course in Auslan. So for me to get better at Auslan and be able to read a book to my child I have had to travel lots. I have travelled to Sydney to do workshops, to Benalla, and to Melbourne to do bits and pieces of the course to be able to communicate with my son.

Senator TIERNEY—Is the course at Melbourne University—

Mrs Taffe—That is the teacher of the deaf course.

Senator TIERNEY—Yes. Is that specialist component a one-year add-on to normal training? How does it work? How much training do the specialist teachers get?

Mrs Taffe—Could I ask Damian Lacey to answer that, if that is okay?

Mr Lacey—The course at Melbourne University is a one-year course and it is postgraduate. There is no pre-existing language requirement for entry to that course so you can let in people who have done their teacher training but have not pre-existing skills in Auslan.

Senator TIERNEY—Right, but they have one year of training and in that time there is inadequate preparation in Auslan. Has any association taken that to Melbourne University and said, ‘Hey, why don’t you change your curriculum?’ What is the interaction between the consumers of the service and the people who are providing the training?

Mr Lacey—I think you would find that there have been a number of representations. The issue is the amount of training time available and the pressures on that training program to accommodate all the varying needs.

Senator TIERNEY—It is a pretty basic need though, isn’t it?

Mr Lacey—Yes. There are issues about philosophy which the system unfortunately gets compounded by and with low-incidence disability like profound deafness there are a lot of unique situations that are not able to be addressed adequately.

Senator TIERNEY—So is it essentially a time problem or the amount of philosophy by the staff?

Mr Lacey—It is time and resources. To give them credit, Education Victoria has actually invested quite substantially in in-service training for several teachers. Over the last couple of years they have enabled scholarships so teachers who are already in-service can actually get qualifications in Auslan as a LOTE. That has been a major response to a campaign that was put forward but that does not change the situation for the newly graduating teachers who really come out with inadequate training.

Senator TIERNEY—What sort of time is involved in doing this properly in a pre-service course?

Mr Lacey—You would need at least a three-year language course as a prerequisite to have the skills to get in to do Auslan and graduate as a teacher of the deaf in Auslan.

Senator TIERNEY—Why do you need a three-year language course?

Mr Lacey—Senator, if you or I were to learn French tomorrow and then go out after a ten-week course and start teaching it, I think parents would be upset.

Senator TIERNEY—How are you using language in that sense?

Mr Lacey—As a language model you need to have a full comprehension of the language before you can actually be a teacher.

Senator TIERNEY—I see, the Auslan language.

Mr Lacey—Yes.

Senator TIERNEY—I thought you were talking about some language course.

Mrs Taffe—Auslan is a language and is the recognised language of the Australian deaf community. Like any other language, for example, German, it has structure but it has a different modality.

Senator TIERNEY—I assume there are people who are trained in it. How does that training work for those people? Do they do that in pre-service? You say that it takes several years.

Mr Lacey—The issue is that you should learn the language before you can teach it and become a teacher of the deaf.

Senator TIERNEY—How does that work in reality?

Mr Lacey—Through university programs. La Trobe University has language programs at postgraduate level.

Senator TIERNEY—So they cannot do any of that in their pre-service training?

Mr Lacey—They do not get to do that before they graduate as teachers of the deaf, but they are able to do it later if they are so motivated and prepared to pay the fees.

Senator TIERNEY—So they have to do three years and then do the other. I can start to see why there is a problem. That does not mean it is not needed but structurally I can see why people would not do that. Mrs Taffe, I would like to turn to the rural situation. We were told today when we were at a specialist school that there are 80 specialist schools in Victoria for children with learning disabilities of some description. I believe that you are in the Wodonga area?

Mrs Taffe—That is right.

Senator TIERNEY—What sort of access do you have from Wodonga to specialist schools?

Mrs Taffe—In Albury there was a deaf unit that, as far as I know, is no longer running. Because we live on the border of Victoria and New South Wales there are a number of teachers of the deaf in Albury who would be very well suited to teach my son were he able to access an oral system. We do have teachers of the deaf and there are a number of children who use that system but that model does not suit our son. He clearly does not have enough hearing to be able to go through the oral path. We do not have a special school for deaf children in our local area.

Senator TIERNEY—Where is the nearest one to you?

Mrs Taffe—In Benalla—another hour and a quarter away—there is no teacher of the deaf but I believe there is a deaf unit. The teacher of the deaf has moved on and that service is now provided by a visiting teacher who travels many kilometres every week to visit children. I suppose the nearest specialist school to us that would suit my son’s needs would be in Shepparton.

Senator TIERNEY—Mrs Elguindy, if I could ask you, in relation to your son’s situation, you said at one point that he made the choice of going to a mainstream situation?

Mrs Elguindy—Yes.

Senator TIERNEY—Obviously you might have a choice of schools in that mainstream situation. Did you consider sending your child to a different comprehensive school or did you not have that option?

Mrs Elguindy—I do not understand your question.

CHAIR—Were there any other government schools in the region that you could have gone to?

Mrs Elguindy—I did not have the option, only that specific program—15 plus; that is all. Because my son was nearly 15 they advised me to put him in a program called 15 plus. When I went that was the only choice I had. It is a long story. The specialist school did not take him because I said I wanted to put him there for two years after I changed my mind. When the principal asked me why I did that I said, ‘Because I prefer my son to be with normal people and to act like normal people.’ These children copy anything very quickly. Anyway in the end she told me his IQ was very low and I had got to find him another place. I said okay and the only place in front of me was 15 plus. I said all right when I saw the program. It is a fantastic program, a really good program, but the atmosphere has not been right for my son. He used to go back very sad and miserable. I went a couple of times. I would not say I am coming. I see the children lying on the floor. It is very bad.

Senator TIERNEY—If it was so bad did you ever think of sending him back to the specialist school?

Mrs Elguindy—They refused.

Senator TIERNEY—They would not let you come back?

Mrs Elguindy—No.

Senator TIERNEY—What grounds did they give for not allowing your child to come back?

Mrs Elguindy—I do not know but I did ask at his school to ask her again after one or two years. Can Hossam go back again to the special school, and she said no.

Senator TIERNEY—What reason was given?

Mrs Elguindy—His IQ was very low.

CHAIR—What was the name of the school?

Mrs Elguindy—I will write it down for you afterwards.

CHAIR—These are quite serious—

Mrs Elguindy—The one in St Albans. It just slipped out of my mind. I will get it for you.

CHAIR—Let us know later; thank you.

Mrs Elguindy—I will get it. My son was in Sunshine for 15 plus. That is really bad. I put him two days in secondary school to make him happy and for my son to be back as normal again—because all his life he was in primary school with normal people. Do you get my point?

Senator TIERNEY—Yes, I do. You have raised some very profound questions which Senator Carr and I will pursue tomorrow with the department.

CHAIR—We have run out of time today. Thank you very much for coming. Perhaps I could have a word with you while we are changing over the witnesses. Thank you all very much for relaying your experiences to us.

[3.57 p.m.]

FATHERS, Mr Martin Keith, Chair, Education Working Party, Disability Advisory Council of Victoria

FRAWLEY, Ms Patsie, Executive Officer, Disability Advisory Council of Victoria

CHAIR—Welcome. The committee has before it submission No. 216. Are there any changes or corrections that you wish to make?

Mr Fathers—No.

CHAIR—The committee prefers all evidence to be given in public, although the committee will also consider any request for all or part of your evidence to be given in camera. I point out that such evidence may subsequently be made public by order of the Senate. I invite you to make a brief opening statement.

Mr Fathers—The Disability Advisory Council of Victoria education working party submission aims to raise the issues of relevance to students with a range of disabilities in all stages of education, from early intervention through tertiary education including post-compulsory education and training. I have been asked to keep my opening remarks fairly brief, so I will quickly go through a number of points which we have emphasised in the paper: lack of suitably qualified sign language interpreters; the need for further research into specific learning disabilities, particularly the areas of definition, assessment and costs; the inconsistencies in disability support in relation to different education sectors, different states and territories, and between institutions; inconsistencies in funding models; availability of funds to meet need; and the whole issue about alternative formats and the needs of people who are print-handicapped.

There is a need for a whole of government approach in developing programs and policies that relate to people with disabilities. People should not need to chase up this information. It should be freely available. There are a number of variations in access to service provision from state to state, as I have mentioned. The issue of training of teachers—which is clearly part of the previous speaker’s area—is a critical one. It also is something that is critical to the disability liaison officers, the group of people who are responsible in the tertiary sector. There is a need for professional development and standard position descriptions.

We are concerned that education should be generally inclusive for all students. In other words, we should be talking about universal access to education. The issue of things like teachers of the deaf should not be an issue. Education should be freely available to all students and with the use of people like interpreters it should be fully accessible. Finally, there is a need for a non-diagnostic approach to educational support. We need to look at the learning support requirements rather than the disability itself. Those are my opening comments.

Ms Frawley—I do not have anything to add to that.

CHAIR—You have heard the evidence that was put before us about the parents' perception and, in one particular case, a student's perception—that is, a mature age student with a disability and also difficulties with the language. How common are those sorts of responses? Are we hearing atypical evidence?

Mr Fathers—Patsie said before we started this speech that we could probably fill this room up several times with parents with very similar concerns and issues. It is not unusual. It is a very clear problem about information, about communication, about people with disabilities and their carers, support people or parents finding out what is available and how to access it.

Ms Frawley—The issues raised around having to seek out specific information or having to go to someone like a regional director of education to actually get some change or to get a response is again not an uncommon experience but it certainly is not an acceptable experience for a parent of a child with a disability simply wanting to access education. It is a long way to go to get a response.

CHAIR—Whenever I have spoken to public servants I have got the impression from them that they believe the information is adequate and the parents are satisfied with the information that they are given. I can tell you as a politician that I have people coming to me as parents who give me a different impression. In your experience as advocates, do you think parents genuinely are satisfied with the level of support they are getting from education authorities when they are trying to navigate the education systems, be they public or private?

Mr Fathers—Clearly, some will be satisfied, but my sense is that an awful lot will not be satisfied. I understand it is very difficult sometimes to communicate this information, particularly to parents of young children with a disability who have none of the skills of interacting with their schools or their parents and teachers association or whatever else to gain that information. What sprang to mind as you were talking was a project that I came across in Tasmania. It is called the Claremont project. One of the things that makes that a remarkable project is the fact that right at the beginning when a child is diagnosed—in this case with a profound hearing impairment—they have someone visit them at home, either from the deaf community or another agency, who talks to the parents about the sorts of options that are available. That support continues right through to university, in this particular case through bilingual education. There are ways of doing it. It is difficult but I think an awful lot of people are not getting that information.

Ms Frawley—From my experience, what I hear from parents over and over again—and I have worked as a teacher, as a specialist teacher, with the Department of Human Services in the past as education adviser, and I have sat in classrooms, I have been in parent's homes and now I am working as an executive officer of an advisory council around disability generally—is that those parents who do get their needs met do it at enormous cost to themselves and to their families. They feel that they have become annoying, difficult parents. That is not acceptable. If information was as accessible as it should be, those experiences would not be what we hear about time and time again.

Senator TIERNEY—I assume those who do that are the articulate, well-off—

Ms Frawley—Or persistent, emotional, angry people, and that is disruptive and not appropriate for a family, a parent, or a system.

CHAIR—Did you hear the evidence of Mrs Elguindy?

Ms Frawley—Yes.

CHAIR—Do you think that sort of experience is very uncommon? You are shaking your head.

Ms Frawley—My response to that is no it is not, particularly for parents of children who have high support needs, whether that be because of an intellectual disability or behavioural issues. Martin and I were speaking before we came to the table and we said that it comes back to the professionalism of the various people involved in those people's lives—that is, teachers, support workers, integration aids—and the training of those people.

Mr Fathers—There is a point I would like to make on that. It seems to me that we are still a long way off having teachers qualified in teaching in the universal sense—that is, teaching people who have disabilities and people who do not have a disability. Is that a problem of the training from the beginning and the university training? Probably. We have tended to have a specialist type mentality. We have teachers of the deaf and teachers of the vision impaired, and I think it is time we started to look at universal teacher training. I was interested in the previous speakers talking about more qualified teachers of the deaf. In my view, we should have qualified teachers and then interpreters if need be, but not special teaching in that sense.

CHAIR—Is it too much to ask—given the enormous range of difficulties that teachers have to deal with? Just the normal run-of-the-mill classroom problems are sufficient to drive most people batty, let alone asking them to take on such high level skilled responsibilities as well. How do you respond to that sort of suggestion?

Mr Fathers—My experience is in the tertiary sector. I work in the university and the TAFE sector. We take for granted that our teachers will do that. They need to have the skills to teach their students. I understand in a primary school or secondary school it may be different, but I do not know that it is that different.

CHAIR—Mr Fathers, most tertiary teachers are not qualified as teachers. They do not undertake any formal qualifications.

Mr Fathers—I do not want to disagree with you, Senator, but a lot of the teachers do. They do a postgraduate course in teaching. I think it is called teaching and learning for VET students. I cannot remember what the course is.

Senator TIERNEY—What percentage of staff do that?

Mr Fathers—I have no idea—it is not my area of responsibility.

Senator TIERNEY—I put to you that it is incredibly low.

Mr Fathers—Hopefully you can ask that question tomorrow of the Victorian government. I would imagine that you are probably right that it is not high.

CHAIR—We have raised the issue—this is one of the few bipartisan issues—that tertiary teachers should be trained.

Mr Fathers—I would not disagree with you.

CHAIR—We meet enormous resistance. I understand since the deregulation of the TAFE system that the number of TAFE teachers with formal DipEd qualifications—

Mr Fathers—DipEd?

CHAIR—Diploma of Education.

Mr Fathers—I understand that, but I believe the course that—

CHAIR—Well, the VET equivalent.

Mr Fathers—My understanding is that the number has increased quite dramatically. I do not pretend to know all, but I know that in my institution there is a lot of support for professional development in this area. I think most people are aware that the need for those extra qualifications in pedagogy and curriculum development are crucial.

CHAIR—We did an inquiry into vocational education two years ago and the bulk of the evidence coming forward was that teacher qualifications in the vocational education system were not as strong as they used to be. You say that teacher qualifications are critical.

Mr Fathers—Yes.

CHAIR—I would have thought also that the issue of professionalism comes into this as well.

Mr Fathers—That was the point I was going to make. One of the tasks—again, I am talking about the university sector—of responsible officers is to train teachers or people who are dealing with students with disabilities in some aspects of disability support. That is one of the roles that you can do outside of the DipEd or equivalent.

Clearly, one of the issues that we have addressed as disability officers in the tertiary sector is the need for professionalism, or at least recognition of professionalism, within that group of people. Certainly, the national body has been doing a lot of work in this particular area in looking at how we might properly, or differently, qualify disability liaison officers so that we have a perception of consistency, even though there may or may not be consistency across the sectors.

CHAIR—How could the Commonwealth government's role be improved? How satisfied are you with its current performance? You speak of the special educational needs and the assessment procedures being developed. Do you notice any difference in the way the Commonwealth intervenes in these areas?

Mr Fathers—What is the role of the Commonwealth? The Commonwealth’s role is leadership. My sense is that there needs to be more leadership from the Commonwealth, which we are not seeing. The Commonwealth-state disability agreement is always a contentious issue. It seems to go on, and the debates seem to go on. I understand there is an apportioning of responsibility, both financial and other things—I understand that. At the moment, that is a very contentious area and it takes a long time to come to a conclusion.

CHAIR—What would you like to see the Commonwealth do more of?

Mr Fathers—I would like to see the Commonwealth establish things like standards such as: this is the definition we will use for learning disabilities and this is how we are going to assess whether a person has a learning disability or a learning difficulty; these are the criteria for learning supports. I would like real, cross-state Australian standards so we could all feel comfortable that we are going to be doing things the same. Then a student can go from TAFE to TAFE or school to school and know that the same level of learning support is going to be in place for that student.

Ms Frawley—It is about addressing inconsistencies between different states, but also within the areas that the Commonwealth funds for children with disabilities and looking at why they need to be funded, if, in fact, at a state level it was being funded adequately. There needs to be a recognition that all students with or without disability should have the same access to the same sort of education. However you can develop that, it should be developed through leadership through the Commonwealth, as Martin said.

CHAIR—Are you are aware of the funding formulas for schools?

Ms Frawley—No.

Mr Fathers—I have read them, but they are very complicated.

CHAIR—The Commonwealth puts in about $560 per child at a non-government school and $110 for a child in a government school. What do you think about those sorts of ratios?

Ms Frawley—In our submission we did raise the issue whereby a student who attends a non-government school is only able to access a certain amount, $3,000, but if that same child attended a government school, they would be able to access the state government disability support money. There is an example of an inconsistency. Under the Disability Discrimination Act perhaps there would be a way of looking at that issue.

Senator TIERNEY—Let us turn to the whole issue of government attitude to children who are atypical, such as gifted or children with disabilities. As a percentage of the total school population, both groups together are not very large. I just want your perspective on why governments make it so difficult for parents who do need special access, whether it be gifted or disabilities, to actually find out that information. If I went to a web site called www.victorianeducation, would I find a button that would say ‘Disabilities’ that I could press, and then get a whole range of services and who to talk to? Does such a thing exist?

Mr Fathers—Yes, there is. There are a number of ways of getting that. Again, from my particular expertise in the tertiary level, I know that things like the TAFE virtual campus and other areas like that have addressed that issue. Going back to the beginning of your question of why it is difficult, part of the communication thing is—and I think we can all understand this—that if you are a professional and an expert it is easy to presume that somebody who is not one of those experts might not be able to understand what you are talking about. There is a sense of: this is my knowledge, my territory and my familiarity. That may be part of the reason that the exchange of information is somewhat stilted. I know the information is on the web site in various areas, but we cannot presume that people are going to have access to computers and the wherewithal to use the web site to source information.

Senator TIERNEY—We had a lady appear here a little earlier who was obviously very savvy and, you would think, able to access these sorts of things. She still had enormous difficulty accessing information and getting anyone to help her. We can ask the department further questions tomorrow.

Ms Frawley—I think that is partially due to something you asked us about the number of students not being very great. I think you will find that it is growing quite quickly because of the broad definitions and diagnosis around what is seen as a disability or an impairment. I am not arguing that that should narrow. I think there should be some boundaries put around that that are clear and fair in order to be able to identify that sometimes students might have a disability for a short amount of time in their life. I also think that the issue about the information available is dependent only on how much you need that information.

One of the aims of the Disability Advisory Council is to work towards an inclusive community that enables participation for everybody, including people with disabilities. If the attitudes of the community were changed to ensure that they saw children with disabilities as important as children without disabilities, we would perhaps go a long way to making the whole issue less of an issue, if you see what I mean. There is a real need to change attitudes. That would also address the issue of people working with students with disabilities. If they did not see them as that different or that difficult, perhaps parents would not be having such a hard time getting some respect from the professionals.

Senator TIERNEY—Ms Frawley, you mentioned that the numbers are rising because of, I suppose, better diagnosis and other such programs. I would like you to comment on the ability of teachers to do this—to actually diagnose a child who has a learning disability. If the child is left in that mainstream situation, do they have the pedagogical knowledge to teach that child? Broadly, it comes back to the question of pre-service training in Victoria for teachers who may have children with disabilities in the class.

Mr Fathers—Stepping back a little, first of all a teacher would not be diagnosing it; the teacher would identify a problem which then, presumably, will be diagnosed outside by a medico.

Senator TIERNEY—Someone has to refer the child.

Mr Fathers—Absolutely, and I accept that. But my understanding is that certainly there is an awareness of this in the universities that are teaching teachers, and I know that there have been discussions with the Victorian state government, looking at how we might interact in that area in developing further modules in teacher education. I do not think it is something that people are not aware of. There are time commitments on what is expected of a teacher and I think our expectations are going up and the time is not. At some stage we are going to have to talk about a four-year education degree so they can get this broader knowledge.

Senator TIERNEY—In the current preparation of teachers, do they all have to do some work on specialist education?

Ms Frawley—No. My understanding is that they do not all have to.

Senator TIERNEY—It is just an elective situation?

Ms Frawley—It would be a good idea to have an audit of the teaching courses, whether it be diploma of education, bachelor of education or bachelor of teaching—there is a range of ways to become a teacher—to see where areas of inclusive practices and teaching skills and some level of information around working with students with disabilities without becoming a specialist teacher could be included. It would not have to be specific knowledge around disability. There is still room for specialisation, but it is more important that a larger number of teachers from preschool through to tertiary are equipped to work effectively with all students.

Senator TIERNEY—But how do they pick that up? If they do not get it in the pre-service, what sort of in-service options are there?

Mr Fathers—I know teachers can do a number of postgraduate courses that universities offer.

Senator TIERNEY—Not many would do that, would they?

Mr Fathers—What incentive is there for them to do that? In some cases, it comes down to the pocketbook. Maybe one of the things that could happen is that more incentive is given to teachers who do extend themselves and develop further information. I am not entirely sure of the title, but there is a specialist teacher level. I think there are two levels that one could get without becoming a principal. There are levels of the qualifications of the teacher within the teaching profession. So I think there is an attempt at addressing this.

Senator TIERNEY—The odds are that you would only end up with less than one per cent doing that.

Mr Fathers—I am sure you are right.

Senator TIERNEY—For the mainstream teacher, the normal process of imparting all this is through in-service courses, which are usually short courses. I am just trying to gauge, in Victoria, what access teachers have to those courses and how many of them take up that opportunity, particularly in regard to teaching children with disabilities.

Mr Fathers—I would have to take that on notice. I do not know the answer. Another group might be able to answer it.

Ms Frawley—I understand there have been some discussions and some formalisation. I do not know of an association for teachers that were looking at pre-service and in-service training being more formalised than it has in the past in Victoria, but I am not 100 per cent up with that either.

Senator TIERNEY—From other evidence we have received here and in the schools this morning, we are concerned that one-third of children who need specialist education take that up in a specialist school and two-thirds are therefore back in the mainstream. We are trying to ascertain how well qualified the teachers are to handle this situation.

I would like to move on from that to the support the teacher would receive in the classroom, given that they are not trained to do this. Could you comment on the level of specialist support that teachers would receive in Victoria in the mainstream classroom if they had a child with a disability in that class?

Mr Fathers—My understanding is that the majority of the support that is provided in the class is in the teacher aid type of area, which I believe does not have any qualifications.

Senator TIERNEY—No qualifications?

Mr Fathers—No qualifications. It is usually a parent or somebody who has an interest in this area. I believe that it is used hugely. It is extraordinarily expensive and I believe it takes a huge chunk of the disability support money that is available. One area which I know is different and qualified—and it is one that I referred to before—is an Auslan sign language interpreter. Clearly that is a highly professional, highly trained person who does support the universal access element of teaching and fulfils that support role of the teacher as well as the student.

Senator TIERNEY—Could you explain further something you said in that last answer? You said that the people were not especially trained. Then you said this takes a large chunk of the budget. Are these people volunteers or are they paid teacher aids?

Ms Frawley—Integration aids.

Senator TIERNEY—Right, and they are not especially trained for this role?

Ms Frawley—There is a short course which I understand you can do to become an integration aid. There is certainly in-service training provided as well.

Senator TIERNEY—How short is the short course?

Ms Frawley—I am sorry; I do not know exactly how short it is.

Senator TIERNEY—We can find that out by asking elsewhere. So when they say in their budget that they provide this money for disabilities in the mainstream, what they might be talking about to a large extent is this sort of integration aid that is not specially trained in the field.

Mr Fathers—Absolutely.

Ms Frawley—Yes, definitely.

Senator TIERNEY—Thank you for that information. In your submission you referred to parents being confused and disempowered by the fact that often governments will change criteria and change funding formulas. Perhaps you could explain to the committee two things, if you can. First, why do they do that? Also, what are some of the effects on parents and children of those sorts of changes?

Ms Frawley—I think the question why do they change is too complex and I do not know the answer to that, so I will be honest about that.

Senator TIERNEY—We can ask tomorrow.

Ms Frawley—You can ask some politicians.

Senator TIERNEY—No, we will ask the bureaucrats, not the politicians.

Ms Frawley—If you look back over 10 or 15 years, it could also be a change in philosophy, in understanding of disability, in perhaps more and more areas being diagnosed, for example attention deficit, hyperactive, Aspergers and specific learning disabilities. So in the last 10 or 15 years there has been some growth in knowledge around areas of disability, and perhaps that has affected change in disability and impairment funding within the education system and therefore definitions of disability and approaches to providing support. On that side you could say that is a positive change. Perhaps why else it changes is that there is often a debate around what is better, specialist education or mainstream education. That debate has been going on for a number of years as well. Regardless of whether it is a philosophical debate and whether it has merit, it is unfair and unfortunate for parents to be caught up in that. For them it is their child wanting to go to school. It does not really matter what year or what the philosophical debate about specialist versus mainstream education is; they just want their child to be able to go to school. So it is that ongoing challenge about making the bureaucratic systems which need to be in place understandable for parents.

CHAIR—What impact has the discrimination act had on these changing attitudes?

Mr Fathers—Phenomenal. It really has had a profound effect. Taking my own situation, when I did my first degree in another place the second year of my degree was in the fourth storey of a building with no lift and I was told, ‘Tough bikkies. If you can’t get to the class, get out of the course.’ We have had huge changes since then. All institutions are reacting in a far more positive way. I think the concept of universal access has really become embedded. We have still got some way to go but it is coming there. People are much more aware of their responsibilities on things like physical access.

CHAIR—So this is over ten-year period. In 1992 it was passed.

Mr Fathers—Absolutely. The way the act is put, the person with a disability not proving that they have been discriminated against but the other way around, is a profound part of that. We are seeing some really positive changes. Things like the action plan are a good example. That was a fairly minor part of the DDA, but the action plan itself has become a very powerful tool of change for many institutions in many places, at least in giving a time line where change can be introduced.

Senator TIERNEY—My last question relates to the early identification of children with disabilities. Often parents with no level of knowledge or expertise realise in the first year of the child’s life that there is something wrong. I am not referring here to profound disabilities but some of the ones that might come in on level 1 or level 2. What sort of assistance can they get in the Victorian system early to help with the identification of the condition, and then what assistance is available to them before the child reaches school?

Mr Fathers—My understanding is that there are houses in the community, and I cannot for the life of me think what they are called now, when nursing mothers—

Ms Frawley—Maternal and child health.

Mr Fathers—That is right, maternal and child health centres, where mothers and their young children can actually visit and participate. There are usually nurses there and so on to whom you can talk about the physical side of things. Clearly when it comes to talking about the implication of that physical disability or disability to education, that is another step beyond, but I think you could start at that point.

Ms Frawley—To add to that, there have been over the years a whole range of approaches to early intervention. Within Victoria, there has been some dismantling of early intervention programs. But in the recent budget $12 million has been provided over four years to improve access to preschools for children with disabilities, which is really positive. A large body of research says that early intervention is incredibly important. Again, that relies on not only maternal and child health nurses and preschool teachers but also doctors and other people who come into contact with children to be more attuned to some of the specific flags of what could be a problem.

Senator TIERNEY—If I turned up to one of these preschools with a child aged four who had profound language skill disabilities, apart from the normal preschool experience, what would the child receive that is special?

Ms Frawley—There is a specialist children’s family service within the Department of Human Services in Victoria which works with families, preschools and child care to ensure that children with disabilities who are below school age are properly assessed and that there are developmental programs and other supports around, such as speech pathologists.

Senator TIERNEY—Would speech pathologists be involved?

Ms Frawley—Yes. I am saying that this happens, but I also know that many families miss out. The big issue is whether that is due to not knowing or to the fact that the preschool their child goes to does not know about the service or whether the people within child care and preschool are trained to identify issues.

Senator TIERNEY—So the application could be quite patchy.

Ms Frawley—It could be, and I am sure it is.

Senator TIERNEY—Thank you very much.

CHAIR—Thank you.

[4.31 p.m.]

KILLEY, Mrs Christine, Coordinator, SPELD Learning Centre

McKENZIE, Mrs Margaret Mary, Parent of learning disability child, SPELD Learning Centre

TIPLADY, Mrs Sharon, Parent of learning disability child, SPELD Learning Centre

CHAIR—Welcome. The committee has before it submission No. 239. Are there any changes you would like to make?

Ms Killey—No, there are not.

CHAIR—The committee prefers all evidence to be given in public, although the committee will also consider any requests for all or part of your evidence to be given in camera. I point out that such evidence may subsequently be made public by order of the Senate. I now invite you to make a brief opening statement.

Ms Killey—I am a trained primary teacher with a graduate diploma and a master’s of education in special education. I have been teaching for 17 years—the first seven in the classroom and the last 10 in special education. I am presently the coordinator of the SPELD Learning Centre of Victoria and I run a private tutoring business, teaching children both at home and in class during school hours. I have three children of my own. I am very passionate about teaching and I feel strongly that all children deserve the best education possible.

Some of my students have been identified as having a problem and have been referred to me or to SPELD directly. Others have slipped through and, due to the initiative of parents or teachers, are now my students. I feel it is more difficult to find difficulties that are not physically apparent, like dyslexia or a delay in development or specific learning difficulties. For a normal classroom teacher who suspects that a student has a learning difficulty, most are unable to assess the problem and do not have the skills to address the problem. There is also a big time element with this. I believe strongly that the earlier we can intervene with the problem, the more chance there is of fixing it. More intervention programs need to be offered at an earlier age. The effectiveness of early intervention programs is good if they are made available. In my experience, there are no widely available programs similar to Reading Recovery for students with difficulties in maths or writing.

I see desperate, caring parents who know their child has a problem but who do not know what to do. So many of them are very willing to help their children, but they are not sure how to help. The resources are just not there for the parents. Sometimes the school is not sure what to do. My big concern is that if a student is assessed, a problem is found and they do not qualify for funding, there are no resources to help the child. Funding is available only for the obvious and more easily recognised disabilities but not for the students who are slow learners or who have slipped behind. I believe there is a great opportunity to introduce learning disability training into teacher training and to extend this via the provision of specialist in-service training.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. Mrs Tiplady or Mrs McKenzie, would you like to say anything?

Mrs Tiplady—I am only going to be relaying my personal experience.

CHAIR—That is what we want to hear.

Mrs Tiplady—My child has always had a bit of a problem at school, but whenever we approached the teachers regarding his inability to keep up with his work we were always told that he was going okay and that he was progressing. We had behavioural problems and we attended a behaviour management program at the Austin hospital. When he completed that program, a child psychologist suggested that we have a WISC test performed through the school. We were advised that that was not possible. We continued along the same lines until grade 5. Again, we had behavioural problems and we approached the school psychologist. She suggested that we have my son tutored. I already knew Chris in a personal capacity and I knew that she did specialised tutoring, so I enlisted her help. At the end of grade 5 Chris suggested that we have a WISC test performed, so we organised that privately. It proved that he had a learning disability. Whilst he has improved a lot with Chris's assistance, there is not a lot of assistance through the school. Now that he is at secondary school there is virtually no assistance.

CHAIR—I see. We will come back to that. Mrs McKenzie, do you want to say anything at this point?

Mrs McKenzie—Yes, I will give you the history of my son. He is now in year 11. This will be the first year that he has been given special assistance through the school—it has finally been recognised. That is partly because he has gone into VCE and it is a different story in VCE. But I will work backwards slowly. Last year in year 10 I had him diagnosed for the second time—at a cost of $400—in order to prove that he did have a learning disability so that he could qualify for special consideration in his VCE. I can do that because I can pay that $400, but there are probably a lot of parents out there who cannot.

He was formally diagnosed in either grade 5 or grade 6 through the SPELD organisation. That was the first time it was written down that he was dyslexic. In the intervening years he had no assistance, as I said, up until now. I organised that privately through speech therapy, which we paid for ourselves. Prior to that it was not picked up, but I knew from prep that there was a problem. I knew that he was an intelligent child. It showed eventually on the WISC intelligence test that he was bright—he was around 114 or something like that—but he was not reading well. It took all of that time for it to be formally recognised and I had to do it through having formal tests. It did not come through the primary school at that stage. One teacher along the way admitted to me that my son had a problem but they did not know what it was.

I think that it comes back to what we were hearing earlier—the lack of training and diagnosing in the schools. Because I had a special interest and I have a teaching background, I suppose I picked it up as well. I am therefore saying that perhaps parents who do not have the background that I have might not have picked that up at all. I consider my son to be one of the lucky ones, firstly because I have a teaching background and secondly because I have the money to pay for him to have special help. I know from my experience in dealing with other parents and talking to other people that they do not all have the same privileges that I have. I know there are lots of them out there.

It was a lot of hard work going through all of those years. My husband and I took a completely different attitude towards the education of this child in that we always felt that he had to learn life skills. We have always encouraged him in that way, because we knew that he was intelligent and that he would get around things in other ways than by taking the route of reading his way through his education. We have taught him that there is never a hurdle that he cannot get over—he has to get over it himself or he has to work out ways around it. That is how he has done it. I think he will do okay, but it would have been a much easier route for him and us, as it probably would be for lots of other parents out there, if it had been recognised right from the start and if he had had a little bit of attention in the classroom because of the difficulties he has. His difficulties were not insurmountable—they could have been dealt with.

CHAIR—In fact, they could probably have been dealt with more effectively earlier on.

Mrs McKenzie—Very much so, yes.

CHAIR—Your experience is common, disappointing as that is. It seems that the written and verbal submissions we are receiving point to a high level of dissatisfaction amongst parents as to the effectiveness of the communications between the school systems and the home. What do you think the Commonwealth could do to improve that? How could the Commonwealth parliament assist you?

Mrs McKenzie—I have one thought, because I am in a school system. At the moment, I am working as an integration aide; this is an interim thing for me at this stage of my life. You were asking earlier about integration aides and qualifications and lack of qualifications. I am a highly qualified integration aide, but I am rare. They are not qualified, but I know within the Catholic system too they are only paid $12 an hour anyway, so you are not going to get qualified integration aides at that rate. That is something that needs to be addressed. But probably, more than aides, I think assistant teachers or a second person in the classroom where there are students with disabilities—

CHAIR—Do you think auxiliary staff might be an issue?

Mrs McKenzie—Yes.

CHAIR—What about parent-student liaison officers? You are experienced as a teacher and at least two of you are teachers; do you think there is a role there in terms of improving the communication between the school and the parent?

Mrs McKenzie—Between teachers and parents?

CHAIR—Yes.

Mrs Killey—In the primary schools, the liaison is quite good because you do see your primary school teacher fairly regularly. They are very accessible; you can go up and quickly have a chat in the morning or afternoon if you have a problem. That is my experience as a primary teacher and as a mother. It is probably more in the high school system where it is very hard to get an appointment with a teacher because they are being taught by a huge group of teachers. I know with Sharon, when we have tried to arrange support group meetings it has taken a term just to get to first base—without exaggerating.

Mrs Tiplady—It is also their understanding of the problem.

CHAIR—Is this a problem at the school level or do you think the regional structures are also at fault, given that there is a need to coordinate services within a particular suburb, for instance? Is that an area where we could assist?

Mrs Killey—I think it is. I am one person and I am helping a whole range of students but there is nowhere I can go for the local primary school, like a base group. They used to have the special education units where you had a group of support teachers. That worked quite well, but my understanding is that they are not available anymore.

CHAIR—In the experience you had with the education system, how often have you been satisfied with the level of services provided by the schools?

Mrs McKenzie—As far as his disability is concerned, I probably have not been. If I put the disability—or the difficulty, as I like to call it—aside, I am happy at his school because he is happy, he enjoys himself and he is progressing. But we have had to do all the work in getting him over the hurdles of his learning difficulty. I would say that in the secondary school, and that is probably where there is a gross lack of extra help, he has probably mostly gone unrecognised as having a difficulty, a disability or a problem. Every year, we would have to go up and tell the home room teacher because the records would not be read, and then that probably would not have been passed on to the subject teachers anyway. It needs a whole lot of coordination and it probably needs extra hands and funding to do that coordination.

CHAIR—Mrs Tiplady, have you had any good experiences at all that you could report?

Mrs Tiplady—Yes, I have. If we could have got recognition of the problem through the school earlier, that would have certainly assisted. But once the problem was identified, I had great assistance from Ben’s primary school in grade 6. They admitted to not knowing much at all about the disability. We had Chris involved in meetings. We were having weekly and fortnightly meetings and then moved on to monthly meetings. His grade 6 teacher was absolutely fantastic. We had the meetings with the grade 6 teacher, the vice-principal or the principal and the school psychologist, with Chris coming along—we paid for her attendance. Chris provided them with information on the disability and ways to help Ben in the classroom. That worked really well and brought him a long way along.

CHAIR—If you are saying, for instance, that the problem is not identified, the level of communication is irrelevant because there is nothing to communicate if people do not understand what it is that is the problem. There used to be quite an extensive disadvantaged schools program where, from my recollection, teachers were directly employed to provide assistance with learning disabilities and to provide coordinators and those sorts of things. Have you seen many of those around in recent years since that program has been abolished?

Mrs McKenzie—I have, and I know they are at the school he is at, but he was not ever severe enough. There was always someone who had more problems.

CHAIR—There were always higher priorities, were there?

Mrs McKenzie—Yes. His problem was certainly not visually obvious, and also he was passing, but he was still a kid with ambition and he wanted to do well. He did not want to fail, and he did not fail. I think he was ignored because he was not seen as a bad case. The funding just did not go far enough.

CHAIR—That is the point we have reached now. Mrs Killey, you are saying that the question of the assessment process is critical to the level of funding you receive and to the attention that you are given. You are also saying that it costs $400 to do the test.

Mrs Killey—Yes, it does.

CHAIR—Why is that?

Mrs Killey—If you go privately. My understanding is that when you go through the government system you have to wait until a time is available. I have seen some children wait for three, four or five months. I know Ben was going to wait for about five to six months. That is why parents who can choose to go privately. It is the time factor that causes problems.

CHAIR—Is this the WISC test?

Mrs Killey—Yes, it is the WISC test. As a teacher, I can do other tests. I can do the Neille or the Waddingtons, which are fantastic, but I find that the generalist primary teacher is not aware of those tests and we could maybe make them more aware. This has worked exceptionally well because now I am working in school hours with the classroom teacher, and it is fantastic. Once you are into the school you know you have the school’s support. You are not a foreign body and you are all working together. I am working in the school and I do a quick diagnostic assessment, which takes half an hour or 45 minutes. I can see the problem straight away. I am not a psychologist but I can see the learning problem straight away. I have been setting up the program for the classroom teacher, so it takes the burden off them. I have all the resources behind me with years of experience, and that has worked exceptionally well. The child has really benefited in every single case.

CHAIR—These are not new tests, are they? The Neille one has been around for a long while.

Mrs Killey—The Neille has been around for a long time but the general classroom teacher is not aware of how to use this test. There are other South Australian ones, and there is a whole list of tests.

CHAIR—Yes, I know. Is that an area where the Commonwealth could perhaps provide assistance in terms of assessment?

Mrs Killey—Yes, definitely. The earlier it is done, the better. My children are in grade 2, 1 and kinder. There is nothing wrong with my little boy, but last year if I had not picked him up a bit myself and done a lot of extra work with him at home he would have been one of those children. He is a bright boy, but he would have slipped through just because of the child that he was. There was no problem, but I had to work very hard with him at home. I knew how, and again I felt lucky.

CHAIR—Are these diagnostic tests as distinct from the leagues table tests that there is a lot of money spent on at the moment?

Mrs Killey—Yes. Straight away it shows the child who, for whatever reason, has not picked up the alphabet or has not picked up blends, has not picked up endings, and they are the things that we need to fix. If we fix them in prep, 1, 2 and 3, there is not a problem later on. The earlier they are fixed, the more you build up their confidence, because by the time we get them in grade 6—

CHAIR—So if we spent the money on these diagnostic tests instead of the leagues tests, do you think we would get better value for money?

Mrs Killey—Without a doubt. Even in grade 3 with the AIM test, as a classroom teacher I could tell you in my grade 3 class who is going to come out there and who is going to come up at the other end as well. That frightens me a bit, because then you get these results and there is no funding then to come in to say what are we going to with this group that has come up at this level or, at the other end, what are we going to do with those as well? The earlier the better. You can fix it and you change the child’s life. School is then a very positive experience for them. I have seen that.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. That is very important.

Senator TIERNEY—Mrs Killey, you mentioned that you have 17 years experience and a master’s degree in the field. What is your view of the level of training of teachers in this area?

Mrs Killey—As in a general teacher?

Senator TIERNEY—Yes.

Mrs Killey—Not very high. I was very lucky as a general classroom teacher, because in the first school that I went into the older teachers took me under their wing and showed me absolutely everything that made me want to go back and do my special ed. After my special ed training, my whole teaching style changed and I understood children’s learning and how they learned so much better. I got far more out of my follow-on education than my graduate education. When I got out of college I was a bit scared and I really did not know exactly what to do.

Senator TIERNEY—So you did all that at your own initiative.

Mrs Killey—Yes.

Senator TIERNEY—I just find it amazing that, if there are a number of simple standard tests, teachers would not even be aware that they existed.

Mrs Killey—I do too.

Senator TIERNEY—I suppose it is a policy question, but I am rather curious as to why in Victoria there is no requirement for special ed training of teachers.

Mrs Killey—I wish there were.

Senator TIERNEY—Does your association put pressure on government to try to bring that in?

Mrs Killey—We do. We try our hardest to help, because we are one of the few organisations that take teachers who are training to be special education teachers for their teaching rounds. I train between six and 10 teachers a year—or they have their teaching rounds with us—but they find it very difficult to find schools. There are very few government schools that have chosen to use their funding for a specialist teacher to have their teaching rounds—for someone to show them how to become a special education teacher or give them the extra resources.

Senator TIERNEY—Mrs McKenzie, in your oral submission you mentioned the secondary situation. You seemed to be alluding to the fact that it is perhaps even worse in terms of diagnosis of children with learning difficulties. You were indicating that records should be passed on, but shouldn’t teachers be able to pick up that a child has a learning difficulty? You seemed to be indicating that they were not.

Mrs McKenzie—They should be able to, rather than looking at the child and saying, ‘He is not interested’ or ‘He is a behaviour problem’ or ‘He is dumb,’ which is perhaps how he would appear. The fact is that he was not dumb; he used to be a behaviour problem in his earlier days because he was frustrated. It is not only a frustration; it is a way of hiding the fact that you cannot do, you cannot achieve and you cannot read. You become a behaviour problem so that people do not notice what you cannot do and because you feel a failure otherwise. I think a lot of that happens in both primary and secondary schools and that these kids pass through that way. Perhaps the teachers look at them that way because they are not trained to pick up those disabilities.

I think that those disabilities do have to be picked up in the early days, in early primary rather than in secondary, and they have to be well documented by the secondary school. And teachers in the secondary school need to be trained to take note of what is documented, and they need to note what difficulty the student has and teach from that point of view rather than teaching from an average point of view or the way they usually teach.

Senator TIERNEY—Behaviour of children in schools has always been a problem.

Mrs McKenzie—And students can hide behind it.

Senator TIERNEY—It just seems that in recent years it is a rising problem. I assume you are indicating that one of the preventive strategies would be that, if we put a lot more into diagnosis earlier on and teaching strategies, train teachers earlier, perhaps the behaviour problems would diminish.

Mrs McKenzie—His behaviour did improve once we worked out what his problem was and recognised it.

Senator TIERNEY—In relation to that, you said, ‘We did it all ourselves.’

Mrs McKenzie—I do feel that is what we did.

Senator TIERNEY—Could you explain that further in terms of why you were not getting any help from the system, why you then had to do it yourself, and what the help was that you got to fix that problem?

Mrs McKenzie—There is a bit of a time gap, because he is in year 11 now, so he is 16 years old. I am sure things would be a bit better if he were going through now. I taught him at home partly because I knew how to teach reading. I did all the background and phonic work. He was my third child and I did probably three times as much with him as I did with the older two. I had to sit down with him on a very regular basis and really teach him reading. There have been an awful lot of parents who could not do that because they did not have the background to do it. He was lucky that I did. That got him reading reasonably well. He does not enjoy reading—he still would not read a novel unless he had to. I do not worry about that because he is going to get where he wants without that. If I pushed that too much now, he would become very frustrated.

We were told to allow him to drop a language as fast as he could, which was in about year 7 or 8. We did that. This is where this life skill business came in. This shows how determined this kid is: he decided that he wanted to do a student exchange but he did not want to do it in an English speaking country, he wanted to do it in Italy. So we allowed him to do that—one, because we could and, two, because he was dyslexic, and we felt if he got through that experience, he would prove to himself that he could do basically anything. In the half-year prior to going, he taught himself Italian with some outside assistance. He then picked up the language while he was there. This is what I mean. We took all these approaches to get around his learning difficulty in the school system. We allowed him to do extra things or different things so that he could always prove to himself that he was a bright kid. It kept his confidence up.

Senator TIERNEY—What does that say for children of parents who are not all that well educated—

Mrs McKenzie—They cannot do that.

Senator TIERNEY—who might have language problems? What happens to them in the system?

Mrs McKenzie—Exactly. What does happen? We had the background and the know-how, but most do not. Through my own experiences in teaching, I see that often. I often say to parents, ‘Try to find other avenues or try to build the child up in other ways to get around those hurdles,’ but it would be much easier for the school system to do it—especially for those who cannot send their kid off to Italy for an exchange. That is taking a big step really, isn't it? Maybe the school system could do it.

Senator TIERNEY—Thank you.

CHAIR—Thank you very much indeed for sharing with us today. It has been very good.

Subcommittee adjourned at 4.58 p.m.