



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

# Official Committee Hansard

## SENATE

EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION  
REFERENCES COMMITTEE

(SUBCOMMITTEE)

**Reference: Education of students with disabilities**

TUESDAY, 13 AUGUST 2002

MELBOURNE

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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**SENATE**  
**EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION**  
**REFERENCES COMMITTEE**

**Tuesday, 13 August 2002**

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

**Substitute members:** Senator Allison for Senator 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 Senators Allison and 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.

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**Subcommittee met at 9.12 a.m.**

**BILLS, Ms Kaye Patricia, Member, Independent Education Union of Australia**

**KEENAN, Mr Tony, State Secretary, Victorian Branch, Independent Education Union of Australia**

**RITCHIE, Mrs Sandra Joan, Member, Independent Education Union of Australia**

**ROLLEY, Ms Lynne Margaret, Federal Secretary, Independent Education Union of Australia**

**WOTHERSPOON, Ms Delma Joan, Member, Victorian Independent Education Union of Australia**

**CHAIR**—I declare open this public hearing of the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Subcommittee. On 13 March 2002 the Senate asked this committee to inquire into the education of students with disabilities. The inquiry will include learning disabilities throughout all levels of education with particular reference to whether current policies and programs for students with disabilities are adequate to meet their educational needs.

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 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 its committees is a breach of privilege. I welcome all observers to this public hearing. I welcome representatives of the Independent Education Union of Australia. The committee has before it submission No. 215. Are there any changes or corrections you would like to make?

**Ms Rolley**—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 now invite you to make a brief opening statement.

**Ms Rolley**—We have asked members from our Victorian membership to come along today to talk about issues to do with the education of students with special needs as that occurs on the ground in their particular schools, and we want to leave as much time as we can for them to talk about that practice in their schools. At the outset let me just say that we had an overwhelming response from members nationally. We certainly had a lot from Victoria, but teachers and support staff from every state wrote something to the Independent Education Union at the outset when we started to look into this and to write up our submission. It is certainly a burning question in non-government schools where there are increasing levels of students with disabilities or special education needs. I refer you to page 7 of the submission in relation to the increase in the number of students over the last six years, where the percentage of students going to non-government schools has increased markedly.

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There are a number of other points I would like to make which go to the umbrella group of antidiscrimination requirements under legislation that exists within the country and the impact that has on our sector. Increasingly, teachers and schooling authorities advise of their concern that they are not able to meet those legislative requirements; that they are required to take students and not discriminate against them under the legislation, but that their capacity to actually meet their increasing educational and learning needs is made very difficult by shortfalls in funding and by resourcing issues. It is largely to those issues that we will talk today. I want to put clearly on the record that it is a matter of great concern to our members. In the short submissions that they make all of them refer to their concerns in relation to having to speak to parents about the levels of resources they are able to offer to students and about not being able to meet the legislative requirements.

We have a set of recommendations on page 2 of our submission. I talk there about the need for recommendations about resourcing standards in relation to the education of students with special needs. Those go to backups, if you like, or a set of conditions which ought to exist to assist and to support teachers who are involved in the education of students with special needs. When our members talk about the impact that the lack of resources has and how that flows back upon the workloads of teachers, I think it will give some sharper understanding as to how this is now required within our community. I might leave it there and let Tony speak because we do want to give most time to our members.

**Mr Keenan**—I will also be brief because I think it is probably of more value for you to hear from people actually involved in the field, but I have just a couple of points that I would like to make. It is a very large issue with the membership. As Lynne pointed out, when we put out requests for assistance in preparing the submission we were overwhelmed with responses, mainly from people who work directly in special ed. It is probably one of the few issues that I receive parental calls about. The only other time really when I get calls from parents is when there is, say, a school closure or something like that, but I regularly receive calls from parents asking if we are able to assist in this area.

I would like to talk a little bit about the impact it has on our dealings with employing authorities. Lynne has already mentioned the tension with the legislative requirements around disability. The other area that it impacts on is that of stress and health and safety, particularly as teachers increasingly are dealing with difficult students. In the more extreme cases, obviously, the impact is about violence against the teachers or other students. But we are increasingly seeing schools being required to deal with kids with emotional and psychiatric issues which do not necessarily fall into the funding criteria, and that results in increasing calls for us to assist with stress related or, in the more extreme cases, violence related issues.

The other thing which I draw the senators' attention to is the need for it to be dealt with cooperatively between state and Commonwealth. Whilst it is primarily a Commonwealth responsibility, the various states in different ways provide assistance for students with special needs. In Victoria, for example, specialist services such as speech pathology, psychology and so on are provided by the state government. In 1995, the Victorian government did away with the directly employed speech pathologists and psychologists.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Sorry, they did away with what?



**Mr Keenan**—Until 1995, the state government directly employed psychologists and speech pathologists who serviced state and non-government schools. They were done away with in 1995, and the money was transferred to the employing authorities.

**Senator TIERNEY**—It was transferred to what?

**Mr Keenan**—The employing authorities, as in the Catholic Education Office, for Catholic schools—

**Senator TIERNEY**—In bulk?

**Mr Keenan**—Yes, and to the AISV for the independent sector. The Catholics have employed, directly, speech pathologists and psychologists, and the independent schools dole out the money on request to various independent schools to provide those services. The impact of that has been a downgrading of those services, and it is particularly in the independent sector where that has been a problem. Because of the mix of Commonwealth and state, I think it is particularly important the issue be referred to the MCEETYA school resourcing task force, which is the task force looking specifically at issues of funding and resourcing for schools. Other than that, I think it would probably be best to hand over to members to talk about their experiences in schools.

**CHAIR**—Who would like to go first?

**Mrs Ritchie**—Me. I work in a small Catholic primary school. We are located in Kyneton. We have 199 students, so it is a fairly small school. We have seven students who are currently accessing funding for integration needs—which is a reasonable number in a school that size, really. It is basically one in every class, but it does not in fact work out quite like that. Due to the different sorts of children coming into the school, you have different sorts of issues that arise. I have been the principal at this school for only 18 months. When I started at the school we had two children on the program that were accessing funding; that was it. We now have seven. They have come through, both times, in our prep year. So there have been issues for us just with transition, with that number of children coming through. Personally, I have found it to be quite difficult at times. Last year, as we did not get funding early on, I spent a great deal of my time almost in the role of teacher aide—because we did not have teacher aides in place—in classrooms and sorting out the sorts of things that were going on with our students.

We have a number of children, two in particular, that need fairly serious funding. One of our students has cerebral palsy and she is unable to sit at a desk on her own: she has no balance, she has no speech, she cannot feed herself and she cannot toilet herself. Obviously, she is a little girl that needs a fair bit of assistance. When she came to us in July last year, we had missed funding. Funding happens in February, and you can apply again in October. When she enrolled at our school in July—they had moved into the area—I could not access funding for her. So we had a student in our school with huge needs, I felt, without any sort of funding at all. We could not take her on and just say to her parents, ‘I’m sorry, but we just don’t have any money for her.’ You could not possibly put her in a classroom with the teacher and just leave her there. She could not sit at a table on her own; she needed someone with her. For that six-month period, we essentially funded her through our own money.

The area that we are in, Kyneton, has a large number of families that access education or maintenance allowances, and we have families that work in local businesses like the abattoirs, the mineral springs and places like that. It is not a wealthy area by any stretch of the imagination, so even our fundraising capacity is fairly slight. For us, in that period of time, to be propping up the funding for a little girl like that was a fairly serious strain on our resources.

There are also a number of issues with children coming into a school that is 21 years old. It was not built at a time when we were expecting to have children in wheelchairs, so ramps and those sorts of things were not in the school. Money has obviously had to be spent on those sorts of things. We did access some money this year to help pay for the ramp we had to build. Because we are an older school, we had nowhere for these children to be toileted; they could not actually get into the small toilets we had. We have had to build another toilet with wheelchair access which, because of the design of our school, essentially meant that our two staff toilets were replaced with a toilet for these children. We were given some money to cover that, but we have since had to rebuild our staff toilets and we have had no money for that. So there have been many issues regarding money and funding for a school of our size, and there are as well the difficulties that come, I suppose, with the community when you are looking to support children in this way. The other thing we have found to be really difficult—

**CHAIR**—If I could interrupting you at that point, before you move on to another issue, we have to conclude this session in about 25 minutes, and I know my colleagues would like to ask you some questions. That may provide the opportunity to put the views that you want to put. Your colleagues may want to speak as well. So, if possible, could you keep your comments very brief at this stage. There will be an opportunity for you to enlarge on them during questions. Would you mind if we switched to Ms Bills?

**Mrs Ritchie**—No.

**CHAIR**—Ms Bills, do you want to say something—very briefly, if you could, please?

**Ms Bills**—I am coordinator of what we term the ‘individual learning centre’, which is a learning centre that caters for gifted as well as special needs students. In the realm of special needs, we would see approximately 120 students. The total school population is 1,151 and, as I said, 120 of those students we would deem as special needs. Fourteen of those are funded under the integration program. I did apply for 19 but five were knocked back due to the fact they did not fall within the criteria.

Demographically, 25 per cent of our total school population are sole-parent families and 16 per cent receive family and other sorts of financial assistance. The areas that we service are Frankston, Frankston East, Frankston North, Carrum Downs, Seaford and Langwarrin. But basically, it is a low socioeconomic grouping.

The impact of a secondary school on special needs kids is great—for a whole host of reasons. Students coming from a protective primary environment into a large secondary environment have many issues, which I do not think people realise. Under my guidance I have three integration aides. I employ only aides because, if I employed a teacher on the money that I get to service these students, I would use up that money rapidly. That is an awful thing to say, but I need to stretch the money that I get widely. Therefore, I do a fair bit of the professional development with my staff—it is a ‘train the trainer’ model. I conduct training sessions with my

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aides in order that they can undertake programs; for example, this year we are doing intensive reading programs for these students. We also modify programs, modify assessments and go into classes. Secondary teachers constantly tell us that they do not know how to teach these children, they do not know how to do things, so a lot of work is put into professional development. These are resources that we are not resourced directly for.

**CHAIR**—Thank you, you will have a chance to enlarge on that. Ms Wotherspoon, did you want to say something—very briefly, if you could, please?

**Ms Wotherspoon**—I have worked in special education for a period of 15 years. I have worked across the state, Catholic and independent systems. I am currently at an independent school that services the needs of just over 2,000 students in a prep to year 12 capacity. We work across a couple of campuses. We draw on students from the western and north-western regions, covering the suburbs of Keilor, East Keilor, Taylors Lakes, Keilor Downs, Sydenham, Hillside, Essendon, Airport West, St Albans and Sunbury. The socioeconomic area that we draw from is low to middle class. We are a low-fee-paying independent school. Many people in those suburbs that we draw from wish to access our school. We are an Anglican community school, so people wishing to access our school make the choice on the basis of Christian values, the pastoral care that we can provide and the amount of community involvement that they can have at our school.

In our population of over 2,000 students, at this point in time we have 11 funded students who meet the criteria. I must make the point that, while I am talking statistics here, our statistics refer to real people and, in many situations, these students' disabilities have a huge impact on their families. In some cases, we have families who have multiple children in need of support, so it is a huge impact on those families. These 11 students represent only 0.5 per cent of our current student population, which is minimal. It is a priority at our school to clearly identify other students this year and next year who may be eligible for funding support. We are a 100 per cent open entry school, so students of all abilities are accepted into our college. We have another seven students that we have identified this year that we think will clearly meet the criteria for funding.

I must admit that, when I did move across from the state system to Catholic and independent schools, I was absolutely horrified at the lack of funding that was made available to students in independent and Catholic schools. Our students in independent schools are funded at one-tenth of what they would get in state schools. An example of this would be that a number of our funded students who are accessing only three hours of support time a week would be funded full time in the state school system. This impacts hugely on learning programs for those students. I must admit that I am passionate about enabling students with disabilities to operate within our school system and to have access to our school system, to become independent learners and to be able to contribute to our community as a whole.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Australia probably funds the independent system more generously than any other country in the world. We have recently, through the schools bill, brought in funding for the next four years, which was a reasonably generous deal for the private system. What I cannot quite understand is why, given that the private system accesses money from the federal government, from the state government and from parents—from fairly large fees, in some

cases—there is not enough money in the system to cater properly for students with disabilities who want to go to independent schools.

**Ms Bills**—In the Catholic system, the fee structure is quite different. In the regional college where I teach, the fees basically just cover the cost of the staff that are already there. The only funding that we get for special needs kids is through Commonwealth targeted programs; there is no extra fee calculated to top up that amount.

**Senator TIERNEY**—But when we changed the funding, the Catholic system was notionally put on the old level 12, which gave a boost in funding.

**Ms Bills**—Through the targeted programs?

**Senator TIERNEY**—No, I am talking about the overall level across the whole Catholic system. I am wondering why the Catholic system cannot handle this centrally to some extent, given that we gave that funding centrally. I can understand that suddenly to have a child with a high disability come puts a big cost impost on that individual school with that case, but I wonder why, in a systemic system, you could not be given additional funding from the centre when you have those higher needs.

**Ms Bills**—I do not know the facts and figures. I am only talking from experience. I think the needs are growing—and growing beyond the increase in funds. This is my perception. I worked in the state system too, prior to coming here. I know the growth in this one school has just been phenomenal.

**Senator TIERNEY**—So there is nothing in the Catholic system that actually centrally supports the unevenness of how children with disabilities attend schools. Some schools might have a greater cost burden than others. So there is nothing centrally?

**Ms Bills**—I think Tony may have more thoughts on this.

**Mr Keenan**—Yes, I can provide that answer. The Catholic system does contribute significant additional funds for the general recurrent moneys to students with disabilities.

**Senator TIERNEY**—It would target extra money school by school, depending on the level of disability?

**Mr Keenan**—They target it systemically. For example, the top level of funding that the Catholic system receives from the Commonwealth for students with disabilities is \$3,589 but the top grants they made in the year 2001 were \$14,900—the difference being made up by the money you are referring to, which is general recurrent money. However, just by way of comparison: the top grants available for students with disabilities in state schools for that year were \$29,000.

**CHAIR**—Mr Keenan, I think the point that Senator Tierney is making is that there was \$150 million extra in that last funding package. \$150 million is a very large sum. The State Grants Bill and schedule 8 says that non-government schools would receive \$561 per child for disabilities and government schools \$110. What we are trying to establish—and Senator Tierney and I are in agreement about this particular matter—is: does that money flow to the school?

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**Mr Keenan**—No.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Why not?

**Mr Keenan**—The money flows to the schools to a certain extent in the general recurrent grants, but if we are talking about it targeting these students with special needs then no, it does not.

**Senator TIERNEY**—But you get money specifically for that in the system.

**Mr Keenan**—Yes—

**Senator TIERNEY**—So where does it go if it does not go to the school where the child with a disability is?

**Mr Keenan**—They get some money. The point that we are trying to make is that they get a very small amount of money and certainly not enough money to meet these students' needs.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Where does the rest of the money go?

**Mr Keenan**—Into general grants to the schools.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Senator Carr has indicated a figure that was specific for special needs.

**CHAIR**—It actually says 'for disabilities'. It is specifically for disabilities in the schedules under the State Grants Act.

**Mr Keenan**—Yes, it is distributed on that basis. The top amount you can get is \$3,000 a head, in either independent or government schools. That is how it is distributed, so that is the top amount that is available.

**Senator TIERNEY**—We are trying to figure out what percentage of the money gets through to the actual school to directly assist the child that has a disability.

**Mr Keenan**—That \$3,000 that I am referring to is what goes to Catholic systemic schools and independent schools. That is the top amount. There are three levels available—\$1,000, \$2,000, \$3,000—and then an additional amount of \$589.

**Senator TIERNEY**—How does that find its way to the schools? Those levels are levels of need. So, say a particular school had a high proportion of students who would attract the \$3,000, would that money go to the school?

**Mr Keenan**—Yes.

**Senator TIERNEY**—So they get that?

**Mr Keenan**—They get that, and in the case of the independent schools that money—the \$3,589—goes to the school and then the school may top it up. In the Catholic schools, it is

distributed by the system and the system provides a top-up before the money is distributed. The top amount, as I said, is \$14,979.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Ms Wotherspoon, how does the Anglican system handle that? The Catholic system is large and systematic, and it is easy to do these sorts of things.

**Ms Wotherspoon**—We clearly identify the students who have those needs, we apply for the funding and it comes through to the college. As a college, we make a decision as to how we can best support those students. At the moment we direct that funding towards employing integration aid support for students in the classroom. In some instances, where students are at the same year level, we combine them in the one class so that we can maximise integration aid time for those students. So we may have two students in one class who have access to three hours of integration aid support each. We then endeavour to cover those students for a six-hour time span across our 30-hour school week. We have a range of students who have significant disabilities such as language learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities or social-emotional needs, and we also have autistic children placed within our school system. We endeavour to cover them as much as we can, but a student in the state system who qualifies and meets the same criteria as ours would be covered full time with integration aid support. As well as that, our school comes to the party in that we have established a special education department, we have acknowledged that we have a need within our school and we put programs in place to meet the needs of those students as best we can.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Mr Keenan, you made a comment that in 1995 private schools could access certain state school specialist services for people with disabilities, and then you said the funding went into a block. So you received the money separately, but then you say services dropped. Could you explain what happened there?

**Mr Keenan**—I think services across both the government and non-government sector dropped. There were psychologists and speech pathologists primarily directly employed by the Department of Education, and all schools—government, Catholic and independent—could access those services. They were essentially privatised or contracted out, whatever term you want to use. In the Catholic system, the money went over to the Catholic Education Commission, who then directly employed psychologists and speech pathologists. That system obviously is large enough to do that. However, the level of accessing of those services is certainly not as high as it was prior to that happening. In the independent sector, the money went to the AISV. It is a smaller sector and the money is much less, so what happens is that each school applies and the money is split between the schools. The money goes to the schools and they can then buy in speech pathologists.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Are you saying that when they turned it into a block system, the money that was sent across was not sufficient to support the access that you previously had?

**Mr Keenan**—Yes.

**Senator TIERNEY**—So there was some cost miscalculation, if I can put it kindly?

**Ms Wotherspoon**—Another significant factor is that the amount of money that was then placed, let us say, in a different bucket for separate groups of people, over the years has not increased. As more students are being identified within the school system, that bucket of money

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has to be spread across a greater number of students. That is in relation to Commonwealth funding; it is similar with state funding, and, in real terms, the actual amount per head that is being spent on students with disabilities is decreasing.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Ms Bills, sorry to move on to another matter, but we are short of time. You indicated that, in the area of in-service training, there were a lot of high school teachers saying, to quote what I think you said, ‘We don’t know how to teach these kids.’ Could you explain how, in your system, in-service training is set up to assist teachers to help students with disabilities?

**Ms Bills**—I would say that we have a highly developed Professional Development Committee that is very conscious of the needs of both the students and the staff who are dealing with these special needs students. With in-service teacher training, historically secondary teachers were trained to teach content whereas primary teachers were trained to actually put together the skills, so there has been a whole new area for them to take on board.

**Senator TIERNEY**—As a former trainer of high school teachers, I would take exception to that description.

**Ms Bills**—That is fine.

**Senator TIERNEY**—They are trained to teach more than content, they are trained in the use of teaching methodology.

**Ms Bills**—Yes, okay. I have been trained in both systems, so it is not as if I am coming from one to the other. I have also lectured at Deakin in disability services, so I am perhaps using a bit of licence here. There is a great deal of anxiety because, particularly in our area where social and emotional disorders are growing quite rapidly—especially with attention deficit hyperactive disorder, ADHD—these students can be very disruptive in a class. Teachers trying to cope with the normal mixed ability classroom are now confronted with the mixed ability students plus students who have either emotional and behavioural disturbances or with the situation we will be experiencing next year when we will have three students coming in who have been tested as operating at a grade two level in literacy and numeracy. These are over and above normal requirements, therefore we have to be very conscious that we support our staff.

We run formalised professional development in mixed ability teaching: how to modify units of work and how to perhaps go back over writing in the subject areas—that is a course that is run through the Catholic Education Office that we have staff go to. That is on a formal basis. On an informal basis, we have workshops after school. I conduct workshops on just setting up an assignment—as simple as that: how one writes an assignment that will cater for all students in the class. With tests, we have kids who come to the learning centre to do their tests differently from the classroom. This all takes time and expertise, and we still have 29 to 30 students in our classes.

**Senator TIERNEY**—If I were a teacher in your system, what chance would I have of accessing a program like that? How many days would I get in a year, say, that specifically related to the problem of teaching students with disabilities?

**Ms Bills**—We have put aside Tuesday afternoons this year for all faculties to work on areas of literacy and special needs. We have made a commitment as a school because, with our numbers, the challenges are growing constantly.

**Senator TIERNEY**—How common would that be across the Catholic system?

**Ms Bills**—I would not like to put a figure on it, because I basically do not get out a lot to other areas. However, within the feeder schools in our area, there is definitely a commitment that we need to address this issue. It is no longer something that we take on board at year 7 and then they drift off at year 9—we have a commitment that if we take these students on at year 7 we need to address those issues right through to year 12.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Thank you very much.

**Senator ALLISON**—I want to pursue the teacher training question. Ms Bills, I think you said that secondary teachers do not know how to teach these children.

**Ms Bills**—No, I hope I did not say that. Their comment to me is, ‘We don’t know,’ inasmuch as—

**Senator ALLISON**—I am not saying that they all do not—obviously I am paraphrasing a bit. But is there a difference between primary teaching and secondary teaching with regard to how teachers are trained to deal with students with disabilities?

**Ms Bills**—I would say so.

**Senator ALLISON**—How extraordinary. The problems do not go away when students get to secondary school.

**Ms Bills**—Up until a couple of years ago—and I do not know where they magically went at grade 6—all of a sudden they did not seem to go to secondary school. I sent my teacher aides off to a number of courses, and they were all focused on primary school teaching. The people delivering these courses did not have an idea that these students really went on. If they did go on, they would be sitting there with work sheets to fill out.

**Ms Wotherspoon**—Can I also make the point in relation to professional development for teachers that, as these students with disabilities—particularly the students we have in our school—move up through school and into secondary school, the gap in their learning becomes wider, and it impacts more profoundly on secondary teachers than those in the primary school curriculum. Secondary school teachers have a much wider range of students within their classrooms with needs that have to be met within that classroom situation. Also, considering that our secondary system is I think a very top-down system and that we are heading students towards VCE studies, there is a huge range of areas that schools are expected to cover curriculum-wise now and a huge range of areas that teachers have to undertake professional development on to be experts as such in their fields so as to deliver proficient programs to students in schools.

**Senator ALLISON**—Mr Keenan, in your submission you point to the need for professional development for teachers. Do you not accept that undergraduate teacher courses ought to at

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least provide some sort of basis for dealing with learning disability right through to integration of students with profound or severe disabilities?

**Mr Keenan**—I absolutely accept that. The question is whether they do it adequately for a start. The average age of a teacher is now in the mid to late 40s, so their training and a large bulk of their teaching was carried out when schools and school systems approached the issues of disability very differently.

**Senator ALLISON**—But this committee has heard from teachers more recently trained who say there is not one unit in their undergraduate courses in these areas.

**Mr Keenan**—As I pointed out, you asked whether I thought they should. The answer is yes. Whether I think they do it well, it varies from course to course.

**Senator ALLISON**—Can I ask you about teacher aides. Are they members of your union?

**Mr Keenan**—Yes.

**Senator ALLISON**—You talked about training for teachers' aides. What is the situation in Victoria for courses? What is the requirement in terms of qualifications for teachers' aides? Should these people have more formal training than they currently have?

**Ms Bills**—There are a number of courses available in our area.

**Senator ALLISON**—Who provides those courses?

**Ms Bills**—TAFE offer certificates 3 and 4 for integration aides.

**Senator ALLISON**—How many weeks or years training is involved in that?

**Ms Bills**—Sometimes it is a short course.

**Senator ALLISON**—A week?

**Ms Bills**—No. It would be three months. One of my aides is presently doing a 12-month course, which I think is the best I have seen so far.

**CHAIR**—How many hours do you think that would be? Let us take the short course.

**Ms Bills**—The short course was over a three-month period and it was for one day a week.

**CHAIR**—A full day a week?

**Ms Bills**—A full day a week.

**CHAIR**—Eight hours a week. And the year course?

**Ms Bills**—The year course that one of mine is doing is 15 tutor days over the 12 months that she comes into the ACU, the Australian Catholic University, and then it is correspondence. Then there are hours of work placement.

**CHAIR**—There are many questions that I would like to ask you, and I apologise for the fact that we do not have more time to do it. In general terms, there are a number of themes that run through this inquiry. There is grave concern about funding. That is the perennial argument in education: everyone wants more money. There are questions about definitions which relate to funding. There are legal responsibilities, I suppose, that relate to those sorts of flow-on effects. There are questions of professional development and there are many others. One of the things that really jumps out at me and really concerns me is the extraordinary lack of confidence in the system by parents.

The evidence we have before us is that there is a legal requirement for schools to treat people equally and properly. Since 1999, there have been 35 complaints on behalf of students with disabilities in the state of Victoria—presumably a lot more nationally. To me, that does not reflect the overriding sense of parental concern, because we have had submission after submission, verbally and in written form, to say that parents of children with disabilities are ‘really cranky’ with the way the education systems treat them. I note that students with disabilities make up 1.5 per cent of enrolments in independent schools, 2.2 per cent in Catholic schools and 3.9 per cent in government schools. Can you tell me from your experiences: (1) do you believe that parents are generally satisfied; and (2) why have you reached that conclusion?

**Mr Keenan**—By and large, the parents of kids with disabilities are pretty well informed, particularly about their rights. The figures that you are referring to refer to actual formal complaints, but many of the disputes we have been involved in play out in pretty ugly ways in school communities. It can be one group of parents wanting a child removed and another group of parents insisting on their rights. We can be involved, the Catholic Education Office can be involved and CAMHS, the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, can be involved. In almost all of those cases, there is a threat of action by the parents, and they are fairly well informed. There are also advocate groups—as there should be, and they are pretty good—that advocate on behalf of parents. So all of that would not reflect on the figures that you are referring to, but using the threat of the legislation is quite common. I could give you numerous examples of where we have ended up becoming involved at some stage—the tension between a kid who is an absolute behavioural problem and our members wanting the school to deal with it, the school being caught between the parents and the parent advocate and that then playing out in some way. None of those situations would show up in litigation, because it does not get to that point. But the parents are well informed, and I think there is pretty good community infrastructure to help parents advocate on behalf of their disabled kids. Because of that, you do not see that in litigation.

**CHAIR**—As practising teachers, do you think that these children are well treated within the systems?

**Ms Bills**—All I can say is that I know the parents are very thankful for what we do in our environment. However, there is that sense that we are doing it on a shoestring and that we are going beyond where we perhaps need to. I would like to refer to one case of a child who really required a specialist setting in the social and emotional area—an adjustment unit. We had worked on behavioural management programs with this student for over three years, working

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with the staff and working with the parents. It was a very personal case, in that we had really put time and effort into this young man. We got to the stage where we could go nowhere, because we had exhausted every avenue. We did not have access to a social adjustment unit, because he was in the Catholic system. The last meeting with the principal and the parents was a very sad occasion. We said, 'We can't do any more and he really does need this facility,' and they had to leave the system that they really wanted to stay in in order to access that facility. That is where I feel there is disgruntlement. On a personal level, I think the parents are very aware that every teacher in our school is trying their very best to give their child equal access to the curriculum.

**CHAIR**—Mrs Ritchie, as a school principal, do you think that schools are doing enough to facilitate students being able to fulfil their potential?

**Mrs Ritchie**—I think schools are doing an enormous amount. I know that, at our own school, parents of children who are accessing funding are extremely grateful for what we are doing with the amount of money that we are accessing. We become very concerned—and I read it in part of the submission, too—about our duty of care, as well; for example, we have students with autism, and there are other situations like that where students are unpredictable. You may have children who run away at recess. There is a little boy in our primary school who runs off, so he needs someone with him during the day. His mother knows that we have had to put an extra staff member out with that little boy for every recess, for every lunch, to ensure that he is cared for. That sounds like no big deal, but somebody's time is taken up doing that extra duty with that one child. She knows that that is not something that just comes from nowhere. So I suppose that, as much as parents are a bit disappointed in what is actually available for their children, they know that the schools in general are trying very hard with the limited resources they have to put in place something good for their children.

Generally speaking, the school staff try very hard—and I am not talking about just our school. I know, too, from other schools that it is very hard for them to work with these individual children, to provide a very specialised program for them with limited resources and limited time. The other side is that parents are very well informed. They have been on a treadmill before they come to primary school. They have been involved with hospitals, the medical system and the kinder before they even get to us, so they have already learned that sometimes you have to do the hard things to get what you need for your child. When they come in, the parents are pretty focused on what they want, so I can imagine that, by the time they get up to the secondary system, they have become fairly disgruntled.

**Ms Bills**—I think they cannot understand why it is different: 'You have a choice of sending your child to a particular school, but why is the level of funding and the level of support different?' As a parent myself, I would ask: 'Why can't I send my child to the school up the road? That is where I would like my child to have an education. But, because I have made that choice, I am going to fall short of what is available at another one.'

**Ms Rolley**—In relation to disgruntled parents or parents whom you have described as being particularly angry and upset about the system, I think they can be both. If you have a child at a school and you can see that school is absolutely committed to doing the best it can with limited resources of the kind that have been described, then you would understand why the relationship you have with the school would be at a quite intense and focused local level—more so than it would perhaps be for many parents of able-bodied students. You would know that, but that does

not mean to say that there would not be a broader and more general level of disgruntlement with the system. It is a sense of: 'Look, I know the school. I know the teachers. I know the principal. I know the parent community. I know this school is struggling against all odds to do the very best it can for my kid. I appreciate and know that. But there has to be something better systemically and systematically that addresses these critical needs.' So I think you can be pissed off enormously—if you will pardon the vernacular—but also acknowledge that the best things that can be done at this school are going on.

**CHAIR**—The other point that we are getting is that there is discrimination against children. It may well be arguable from a school administrator's point of view that the facilities available simply cannot be provided: even with a significant increase in money, you are not going to be able to put the ramps in quickly and even if the buildings are inadequate in terms of being double storey or other such things, there is just not the capacity to do it. Do you think there is any discrimination in the system? Are children excluded because they cannot pay fees, and it then becomes opportune to move them on?

**Ms Wotherspoon**—There is certainly discrimination. We have an act that says that we cannot discriminate against people with disabilities but with our own education system we have discrimination across state, independent and Catholic schools in that these students are not supported at the same level as they are in state systems. That needs to be addressed within schools.

We have had instances where parents have chosen the state school down the road because of the level of funding, despite the fact that those parents value the community spirit at the school and would desperately like their students to come to an Anglican, Christian value based school. As people in the community, they should have a free choice as to where their children go to school, regardless of the student's ability.

**CHAIR**—I am sorry that the time has got away from us, but thank you very much for coming along and giving your views.

**Ms Wotherspoon**—Thank you.

[10.07 a.m.]

**MARTIN, Mr Roy Overton, Federal Research Officer, Australian Education Union**

**SYMONS, Mr Peter Thomas, Member, Australian Education Union**

**CHAIR**—Welcome. Do you have any comments to make about the capacity in which you appear?

**Mr Symons**—Yes. I would like to add that I am the Principal of Barwon Valley School, a state special school.

**CHAIR**—The committee has before it submission No. 198. Are there any changes or corrections that you would like to make?

**Mr Symons**—No.

**CHAIR**—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 in camera. I point out that such evidence may well be made public by order of the Senate. I invite you to make a brief opening statement.

**Mr Martin**—I will try to outline what we see as the key issues of the inquiry, and I will try to keep it fairly brief. First, we would like to congratulate the Senate for holding this inquiry; we believe it is a matter of considerable importance. It is regularly raised by our members as an issue that has problems around it in relation to schools in a number of fora.

The following are what we see as the key areas. The first is the definition and the incidence of disabilities. There are inconsistent and generally inadequate definitions and there are problems with those who are identified around the margins, especially those who are not identified at all. The incidence of students with a disability, using whatever definition, has increased significantly in the last decade, and the number of students in schools who have disabilities significantly exceeds the number of students who are identified with disabilities for the purposes of receiving additional support.

The incidence of disabilities in the general population probably now exceeds 20 per cent and, depending on how disability is defined, the incidence in schools is somewhere between 12 and 20 per cent. However, the current categorisations in some states or territories include as little as three per cent of students. Disabilities such as learning difficulties and behavioural disorders, as well as a number of others, are not included and receive no support. The AEU supports an expanded, more flexible and individualised approach based on the identified needs of individual students in an educational setting.

The current inadequacy of funding is fundamental; it underlies most of the problems and prevents their solutions. The increased funding is needed to provide increased teacher support, smaller class sizes, greater time release and training. We believe that for the government to

make commitments to, and purport to espouse ideals about, those with disabilities without making adequate provision of the extra resources necessary to achieve them is hypocritical in the extreme. Yet this is perceived by teachers to be the reality of the attitude of government.

We believe that there is a need for cooperative funding arrangements between the Commonwealth, states and territories through MCEETYA in order to deal with this issue as a matter of urgency. Inclusion, or mainstreaming as it is sometimes referred to, is the area of principal difficulty. I noted your question, Senator Carr, to the last people. That is an area in which there is considerable potential for conflict between teachers and parents. The handling of this area requires considerable diplomacy. It is an area which is potentially a regular source of problems for us in terms of issues raised by members and the way in which parents react within a system that we believe is open to all of the public and where we encourage as many people as possible.

I emphasise that I believe that most teachers have the will and the desire. They sometimes lack the means and the capacity. This places them in a situation where they have to choose between the interests of the student with the disability, the interests of the students who do not have a disability and their own interests in terms of wellbeing and stress levels. That is an issue that we need to talk through and work our way through.

Training and professional development is generally lacking or inadequate. There needs to be considerably more training available to practising teachers and teacher assistants. With regard to initial teacher training, it is important to give teachers in training some introduction to the teaching of students with disabilities and some understanding of approaches, which they can later build on in response to particular situations. Ongoing professional development, related to general and specific disabilities, is then needed.

Allied staff or school assistants are extremely important in the area of disabilities, and we encourage you to look very closely at what happens in relation to allied staff. They are valued extremely highly by teachers and they play a very important role, but many of them have very poor conditions of work. They are often casual and they have no guarantee that the training they do will be used next year because they can be reallocated to totally different situations. There is a general lack of paid training opportunities. The need for more specialised and more recognised teacher assistance is of great importance.

Finally, I would like to touch on the issue of comparative government and non-government school funding. The AEU did not seek to make this debate a major focus of this inquiry. We believe the inquiry should focus on students with disabilities—the majority of whom are in the government system. However, we have noticed the number of non-government school interests that are seeking to use this inquiry as a springboard to get more government money. Without in any way implying that students with disabilities are more adequately looked after in either sector, I simply state that I believe that many of the facts they have presented are oversimplified and ignore important aspects of the funding. There is evidence which suggests that, if anything, the non-government sector do comparatively better out of the funding for students with disabilities. You have already asked questions about whether that money ends up being spent on students with disabilities. I will leave it there. I am pleased to have with me Peter Symons, who is a principal in a special school. I invite him to add a few comments.

**Mr Symons**—I want to emphasise a number of points. The number of definitions of disability impairment for funding purposes across Australia has resulted in difficulties for families in accessing services when moving throughout Australia. Regarding the variation in the identification of the target populations that receive specific allocations in different states, inconsistent and therefore inequitable service provision from state to state will leave some students out of the model. Because there are differences in definition it is difficult to identify and then compare student outcomes for transparency and accountability purposes. Regarding the ever increasing pressure to include additional categories where such an approach is used as criteria for service eligibility, unfunded groups that are not covered by the specific definitions are causing severe frustration in people who are just over the other side of the line, whatever the line is. That frustration was illustrated when I met with parents who had kept their children up the night before the tests so that they would not perform well and would then get into a funding model. That is ridiculous in the extreme—you and I know that. In actual fact you will see across Australia the increase in the identification of students in the disability impairment area. In Victoria, with which I am very familiar, the figures have gone up one per cent in five years. Before that they had gone up only one per cent in 10 to 12 years. The figures we have presented, based on the middle of last year, increased again this year. The parents of unfunded groups of students are resorting to what I would call bizarre methods to get their students into a funding stream.

The lack of trained staff is affecting not only specialist schools but all schools. In initial basic teacher training there needs to be quite a large component where young teachers are taught how to manage students with disabilities and impairments, especially students with challenging behaviour. The age population of the teaching work force means that many teachers with expertise who have done quite a bit of university training in special education will be leaving the work force within five years. That will leave an enormous gap in expertise because the training programs for teachers are not currently there across Australia. There is no initial training so teachers come out with no skills. Recently I spoke to a group of exit students at a university and asked 30 of them, ‘How many of you expect to be teaching a student with a disability next year?’ and no-one put their hand up. I informed them that they would not only have one student with a disability but five or six. The fact that the institution had not even moved in that area to provide those skills was going to cause those teachers frustration. Training is not only for teachers but also for support staff—teacher assistants—as well. Much of the funds that actually go through to schools are paid to the support staff person without any training at all. In actual fact in lots of regular schools that person is the person who delivers the program.

Talking about funding, it is difficult to follow the Commonwealth funding trail to the practitioner. Being the principal of a school, I have attempted this—and other regular and specialist schools in Australia have attempted this too. While we know the figure that comes into the state, we do not know where it all goes. Some of us have the view that there is a lot of money taken out for infrastructure purposes and that it is not hitting the practitioners.

Inclusion has come to mean inclusion of place, whereas inclusion should be focused on programs. Sitting a child in a regular school classroom is not inclusion. They are not getting inclusive programs which will help them to meet their community needs in later life. That is what inclusion means. We have become too focused on inclusion meaning place—where the student is being taught—but inclusive programs are the key. I think there is a push that, if you

have your child in a regular school, there is inclusion. It is absolutely not; it is all dependent on the program.

There needs to be a link between early education programs and school programs. Children who are born with a disability are not born with a behaviour problem but, in ever increasing circumstances, we are getting children coming into schools who have an intellectual, physical or emotional disability, and they have also developed bizarre behaviour patterns in the first three or four years of their lives. Teachers then need to manage the behaviour patterns before they can begin educating the students.

Teachers and teacher aids are ever increasingly being required to get into the area of medical intervention. This can mean being required to administer rectal valium, suctioning students who have difficulty with chest infections and doing different types of nasal-gastro feeding. And, in all these situations, the training is to be paid for out of the school's global budget. The demands have increased because the turnaround time in hospital is a lot faster and many students are now living who possibly would not have been alive until school age in the past.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much for that. It was very insightful. There are so many issues that you have raised that it is very difficult to canvass them all in this short period, so I am going to truncate my question, and trust that I do not oversimplify the point. We have got a whole series of legislative frameworks that say no discrimination is to be allowed in this country, yet we hear evidence, day in, day out, of quite extensive discrimination occurring within our systems. Mr Symons, you are a practitioner; you are a principal of a special school. Have you witnessed discrimination in the education system against people with disabilities?

**Mr Symons**—Yes, but it is subtle. The discrimination act is being used, not as a positive way to include, but so as to not breach the act. The numbers in special schools have grown incredibly over the last two years, and I find that, in some situations, principals in regular schools may be letting the person who has come into the school with their child with a disability sit and wait for half an hour. Or they may make statements like, 'We really haven't got adequate resources to support the program your child needs, so you may want to have a look at the local special school.' In saying that, I am not critical of those people, because, in actual fact, some of the people who are coming in—even five-year-olds with severe behavioural problems—are extremely disruptive in a class of 20 or 30 students, even if there is another support person in there. It is very difficult for them to provide a program that is individually goal based for that student. There is subtle discrimination, yes. Where there is funding and there is frustration, it causes not discrimination, but an attitude where some parents are saying, 'We need to get assessment down to that level so I can get my child a guaranteed place.'

**CHAIR**—So you say it is two ways.

**Mr Symons**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—The parents understand the system.

**Mr Symons**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—The other point, though, is that the Australian Parents Council—which is not a group that would normally come forward here with an argument to say that the non-government

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school system is not doing its job—indicates to us that independent schools have 1.5 per cent of enrolments, Catholic schools 2.2 per cent of enrolments and government schools 3.9 per cent of enrolments. Is that a measure of discrimination and, if so, can you perhaps explain to me why it is in your experience? Have you seen that occur?

**Mr Symons**—In my experience, where parents have had their children in a non-government school or are looking at school entry for four- or five-year-olds, or 13- or 14-year-olds before they move into secondary school, in many cases the non-government school say, ‘We haven’t got the facilities they’ve got; go down there.’ But to my understanding the funding has gone into the system but they are using it, probably, for alternative purposes.

**CHAIR**—Mr Martin, you said that you thought the funding issue had been misrepresented before this committee. Could you enlarge on that?

**Mr Martin**—If I could give an example of the way it currently works or could work and then unpick what the problem is, let us assume that this committee writes a report that leads to states and territories vastly increasing their expenditure on students with disabilities in government schools—which would be a very desirable outcome from this committee. The effect of that would be to increase the AGSRC, the average government school recurrent cost, which is the figure which is used to calculate the funding of non-government schools. The AGSRC would increase, the funding to non-government schools for all students would increase right across the board, but there would be no specific increase that would go to students with disabilities in non-government schools. It seems to me that that in a sense symbolises the problem. The money is in the big budget that goes to the non-government schools but it is not identified or tagged for the students with disabilities in non-government schools. In my view the conditions and the problems in non-government schools are very similar to the problems in government schools. I do not wish to enter into any competition to say which one has the best or the worst conditions.

**CHAIR**—Is it the case that what is required here is someone with lots of money taking these issues to the Federal Court before we will actually see the act being translated into reality?

**Mr Martin**—I think in the material we wrote in relation to the disability discrimination standards, which I would point out have still not been endorsed even though they have been looked at since 1996 in the last MCEETA meeting—

**CHAIR**—In fact, the task force has been going for seven years.

**Mr Martin**—Yes, and we still have not got them. The problem as I see it at the moment is that the legislation actually does require litigious action in order to enforce it, and we do not feel that is the best way to go about it. That comes about because the legislation imposes responsibilities on authorities which, in the case of government schools, are usually education departments. But the parents do not approach the education department, they approach schools and teachers, and the role of schools and teachers within the legislation is very difficult to determine because they may not have the capacity to provide the funding which the legislation would imply that they should. Essentially, what we believe are the standards should clarify the situation in regard to specific schools and specific teachers within the system and should deal with the responsibilities that the directors have in on-the-ground situations rather than in general philosophical principles.

We are not enthusiastic about the notion that the answer is to go to court, because that makes victims. It makes victims of the people who bring the complaint and it makes victims of the teachers who themselves may not be responsible for the situation. We think there ought to be a better way of going about it.

**CHAIR**—I would agree with that, but it would appear that in so many areas of legal interpretation it requires a court to intervene, particularly if this issue has been going on for seven years.

**Mr Martin**—The court cases that have come out have been reasonably inconclusive in terms of settling it anyway. They cause considerable stress for a whole group of people. We think that what is needed is an appreciation by all sides of the difficulties and of the other side's opinion. We need to get together and rationally work some of this through, with the major, overarching issue being funding.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Mr Symons, can I ask you about the balance between children with disabilities in specialist schools versus children in mainstream schools. From the figures we had yesterday, the ratio in Victoria is roughly two to one; twice as many are in mainstream as in specialist schools. This is a result of a change in educational philosophy and practice over the last 20 years. Do you think that has perhaps gone too far? Do you think that we should have a higher proportion in specialist schools to get proper educational treatment for these children?

**Mr Symons**—What I talked about before was inclusion and integration. To start with, the view was: 'If they're there, I'm happy. My son or daughter is in the local primary school with her peers who live in the same street.' But through some of the points that have been made about lack of teacher training, lack of school aide training, class sizes and stuff like that, that has been turned around and a lot of parents are now going back to the specialist schools. Especially in the last 18 months in Victoria there has been a massive increase in special schools. In Geelong, the school I am the principal of has gone from 53 students to 110 in three years—enormous growth. But I do not believe that the trend should be to come back.

I think the answer is, in the short term, utilising the expertise of special schools and teachers with special qualifications to actually skill others in regular schools with writing individual programs and stuff like that. Currently we are in a very dangerous period. Once the experienced and qualified practitioners leave, we are going to be waiting again for a new crop to come up. I do not think the answer is to move everyone back to special schools. There is dual enrolment. Many students at our school, even students with severe disabilities, only come for two days and spend three days in their regular school. So they come to us for the individual program development and paramedical support—being physio, speech therapy, occupational therapy—and they stay in their regular school. They still do the inclusive program which we develop in their regular schools so that they can stay with their peers and move up. That caused problems in secondary school. It is quite okay to have a friend with a disability in a primary school, but as children go through teenage years that does not seem to be accepted very well in secondary school and in many cases we are finding that kids of secondary school age who have been victimised in the secondary system are coming back in.

So I do not think the answer is to increase the population back into special schools, but I think the expertise in special schools across Australia could be used far better than it has been, whereas I think the concept many years ago was that kids who went there just sat and watched

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videos—and that is not the case at all. Every child in a special school in Victoria has an individual program which is documented and agreed upon with parents and which is evaluated each term. We are now in the process of setting up outcomes that are accountable, based on individual programs. That is something that needs to be based on the allocation of funding. Funding will not resolve a problem unless the programs are accurate. You can put money into a system but, unless the programs are the right programs and unless the person is trained, it is not going to work.

**Senator TIERNEY**—That model that you indicated where children will spend some time with you and then go back to the comprehensive and then you assist the teachers with resources from your specialist school sounds like an excellent model. How widespread is that through Victoria?

**Mr Symons**—At our school probably 25 of the 110 students are involved with their regular schools but for kids with severe and profound disabilities it is not appropriate; for example, we have got one boy who is on oxygen 24 hours a day and needs a lot of support. Yes, that is fairly common and, in fact, some schools in Victoria are actually doing reverse integration and bringing students from regular schools into the specialist school for certain programs. This benefits students that have got a mild learning disability where they will need some intensive teaching and structured individual programming for a short term and can then return to the regular school. I think that is the better model than saying, ‘We’re going to run segregated settings in mainstream schools.’

**Senator TIERNEY**—Has the funding been flexible enough to support that dual arrangement?

**Mr Symons**—Our school has got 60 staff—24 teachers, about 26 aides and 10 therapy staff. There are 30 schools around us in our network that are regular schools, primary and secondary. We employ two speech pathologists. There is not one speech pathologist available for any of those 30 schools in our network. Those networks are hounding us for our speech pathologists to support their network. We would like to do that on an outsourcing basis but, as soon as we do that, we are actually taking away from the core job of our school, which is teaching those students.

**Senator TIERNEY**—You are saying that the funding is not there to actually do that?

**Mr Symons**—No, the structure is there to do that but not the actual funding.

**Senator TIERNEY**—So one model would be for you to be provided with more funding and for you to act as a resource for those surrounding schools.

**Mr Symons**—But that needs to be the tag: ‘funding allocated to an outreach program’.

**Senator TIERNEY**—How has the funding worked with that rapid increase in your enrolment? Has the money followed the students? Have you had a proportional increase in your funding that matches the increase in the number of students?

**Mr Symons**—In Victoria there is an index funding model where individual students are rated on an index level of one to six levels: \$3,000 approximately for level 1 and \$30,000 for level 6.

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When a student comes into the school they are assessed as to mobility, fine motor skills and in 10 other areas and this is documented and they are given a rating. That money arrives in the school in the next term.

**Senator TIERNEY**—The practical expression of the philosophy of integration that has been with us for about 20 years in a comprehensive school would be that the teachers would have sufficient expertise and backup resources to teach children with disabilities in a comprehensive setting. Could you comment on how you have seen that go over the last 20 years. I am now talking about children with disabilities.

**Mr Symons**—Are you saying that it was expected that teachers would have the expertise?

**Senator TIERNEY**—Or some sort of training resource backup to actually assist children with disabilities in a mainstream classroom. What I am asking you is: how do you feel that has worked out in practice over the last 20 years in Victoria?

**Mr Symons**—Initially it was accepted that it was a successful operation, but parents now are requiring more accountability. Also, just sending your child to school is not enough; parents want more—and rightfully so. The difficulty is the difference between the expertise required of a teacher to teach students in a regular school and the expertise required of a teacher to run a program of similar quality for a student with a disability in their class; they would need to do lots of extra preparation, because they would require virtually an alternative program in the same class. I am not saying that does not happen in some schools—it does—but it would be very difficult for a teacher to manage that workload.

**Senator TIERNEY**—It would be pretty difficult for them even to do it, given that in pre-service they get virtually no preparation and in-service, I suspect, very little as well.

**Mr Symons**—And that first year out is very important for a new graduate teacher. If you run into a class where there is a child with challenging behaviour and you have not been given any techniques about how to stay away from power plays, you will find that your self-esteem as a teacher is absolutely shattered. In actual fact, it may affect you for the rest of your career. Something that happened on your first day or in the first couple of weeks or months of teaching that you were not aware of may affect you for the rest of your teaching career.

**Senator TIERNEY**—What is your view on the level of in-service training that teachers and the teachers aides who are assisting them in the classrooms get in mainstream schools? Could you draw a picture?

**Mr Symons**—Currently, for teachers who are in schools?

**Senator TIERNEY**—Yes.

**Mr Symons**—The training available to teachers in schools—and I call it bandaid training—is an hour and a half, two hours or something like that after school. It is usually run by another professional. In actual fact, it is very difficult to resolve a long-term problem with a very short-term training program. You might pick up a couple of good strategies but not get to actually understand the philosophy behind letting a person with an intellectual disability have time to make their decision. I used a simple example when we were discussing this earlier of asking,

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‘Would you like a drink?’ Just because it is lunchtime, you might think, ‘Yes, they would like a drink. Here you go.’ When you are teaching you have to learn that, if you are going to ask someone if they would like a drink, you do not pick up the glass and give it to them. You have to wait for the answer. When they then say either yes or no, you can make choices. In most cases people who have not been trained think, ‘Oh, it is lunchtime. It is time for a drink.’ It might be that that person does not want a drink. That is an example of a small teaching skill that you do not get in one hit. It is just through the practice of waiting. I am an impatient person, but usually when I am working with kids I operate a bit better.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Mr Martin, when you went through the issues raised by members, you said that a whole range of children’s disabilities are not properly identified. You put that level at about 20 per cent. Is there any hard evidence to back that 20 per cent figure?

**Mr Martin**—In schools, it is 12 to 20 per cent. I believe we covered that in our submission. It is based on some ABS statistics and a range of figures there.

**Senator TIERNEY**—I think, Senator Carr, you said earlier that five per cent of children in public schools have disabilities?

**CHAIR**—Yes, that was in the Australian Parents Council submission.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Was that based on hard evidence?

**Senator ALLISON**—It is a definition, I would think.

**CHAIR**—It is like all of these things, on the current definitions the Australian Parents Council is saying 3.9 per cent enrolled in government schools.

**Senator ALLISON**—It does not take into account learning disabilities.

**CHAIR**—No. They claim that on the current definitions

**Senator TIERNEY**—So if we look at what is identified and what is not identified, probably about three to four times the number are not identified. Would you agree with that?

**Mr Martin**—Yes, that is a reasonable estimate.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Do you think the reason for the lack of identification is the fact that teachers in pre-service and in-service have virtually no training in identifying children with disabilities?

**Mr Martin**—No, I do not think that is the cause. I do not disagree with your observation about the training, but I think it is more to do with the way that governments set about identification. For instance, whole areas of learning disability are not covered in the definitions and so on.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Such as Asperger’s syndrome and ADHD?

**Mr Martin**—Yes. It has more to do with the eligibility that is determined by governments than the capacity of teachers to identify it.

**Senator TIERNEY**—So governments just define certain groups and say, ‘We are not including that as a disability and therefore not providing special programs and funding’?

**Mr Martin**—Yes.

**Senator TIERNEY**—And that could be almost two-thirds of the cohort, in a sense?

**Mr Martin**—Yes. The other side of that is that, if they define it widely but keep the same amount of money, that obviously creates problems as well. It is probably some of the more severely disabled people that are identified at the moment, apart from the excluded categories.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Finally, Mr Martin, given that the state education department is not identifying people with disabilities properly and not providing proper in-service training teachers, do you think the government here in Victoria is lacking some duty of care towards children with disabilities?

**Mr Martin**—I am from the national office and will only make general comments—both in terms of geography and history—that all governments over a period of time have not really grappled with this problem adequately.

**CHAIR**—But we are in Victoria.

**Senator ALLISON**—Mr Symons, I will ask you some questions about the cost of dealing with the needs of students in special schools. You said that at level 6 the government contribution to the cost is \$30,000. What is the figure for level 1?

**Mr Symons**—For level 1 it is approximately \$3,000, and that will be for a student with a mild intellectual disability.

**Senator ALLISON**—Some of those students would be able to be integrated into a normal school.

**Mr Symons**—In Victoria, the 16,000 or 18,000 students on this model would be on one of those levels—1 to 6—and two-thirds of them are in regular schools.

**Senator ALLISON**—Of those who are assessed to be at level 6, in your school they receive \$30,000 a year. If they go to the local high school—

**Mr Symons**—They get the same money.

**Senator ALLISON**—They get the same money?

**Mr Symons**—The program in Victoria is designed to overcome inequity in funding regardless of where you are. So if your funding is allocated to you on the basis of your educational needs, it is regardless of where the program is delivered.

**Senator ALLISON**—My next question is: does it cost any more or any less for students to be integrated in the school? In other words, with your speech pathologists and all of the support staff that you have, what happens when you dissipate that by putting a student in a class where they may be the only one who is at level 6? Do you see what I am getting at?

**Mr Symons**—Yes.

**Senator ALLISON**—Should we attach more money to integration because, when you group people together, you necessarily can get economies of scale?

**Mr Symons**—At our school, let us say, the class is 110 students times their six levels of funding. We break that down and work out what we want to have as far as staff, resources, printers, computers—the whole lot; and we have a big therapy component in our school. If any of our students attend a regular school and they are two or three days with us, we get only three-fifths of that funding for that student for the year, so the funding actually goes with the student. In a regular school where there are only one or two students, and they are getting the same amount of money, obviously they need to buy resources rather than have the staff in place. On the point you are making about whether it would be better to put money into that situation: the money is not the issue there; it is funding and training. There is a point that—

**Senator ALLISON**—Yes, I understand that and I will come to a question on that in a moment. But it seems to me that it would be much more difficult to buy those services for an individual student than for you to provide them when you have them in-house. That is all I am trying to get at.

**Mr Symons**—In a regular school it certainly would be, because it is very difficult and if you are paying a fee for service to a consultant physiotherapist, occupational therapist or speech pathologist, you are paying in the order of \$75 an hour. Whereas if we employ one all the time—

**Senator ALLISON**—I understand. When a student on level 6 becomes integrated into a normal school, if I can use that term—are we allowed to use the term ‘normal school’?

**CHAIR**—Yes.

**Senator ALLISON**—What is the transparency of the expenditure? Can a parent say, ‘I want to see a list of the items that the \$30,000 is being spent on,’ and agree to it or can this money be used for general support services and other students?

**Mr Symons**—A level 6 child is a very severely disabled child and would need a lot of support. We are talking about someone who is extremely physically disabled and probably emotionally disturbed or intellectually disabled. There is a program support group meeting where they work out the educational needs for that child in that school on this money. In most cases 90 per cent of the money will be spent on an aide to support that person in the school. Any money that is left will then be used to purchase expertise but, in most cases, that is not adequate money.

**Senator ALLISON**—So in schools we are spending that money on aides, whereas in the special setting you are spending it on teachers with expertise or support staff with expertise.

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**Mr Symons**—The model in Victoria, basically, is that our school gets X amount of money, and the school itself can then set the global budget based on the educational needs of the students in the school, so it can balance it. That happens in the regular schools too, but in fact if you have only two or three students in the school you have a limited ability to set up different models to meet those needs.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Just to clarify: two-thirds of the money is spent on teacher's aides, but these people are not specially trained to assist children with disabilities, are they?

**Senator ALLISON**—Exactly.

**CHAIR**—Therefore, why are people putting their children into mainstream schools?

**Mr Symons**—Because it is inclusion. That is what I said before.

**CHAIR**—You are not giving us two fingers there, are you?

**Mr Symons**—That has been the focus all along with many parents, and it is very frustrating. I have had many of them cry in my office. They come with their five-year-old son or daughter and say, 'Has it come to this? Is this it?'—because they see older students in a special school, and it is very sad. In many cases, a lot of the parents want their son or daughter to be in a regular school with regular schoolkids. And I can understand that. In the last couple of years, especially in Victoria—but also in other states of Australia, because I meet a lot of special principals—there has been far more accountability and individual focus on programs. That delivery has actually got out, and a lot of the parents now are choosing specialist schools.

**Senator ALLISON**—Can I pick up on the point you made several times about the lack of teachers with specialist skills. You said that they are an ageing group and that we are going to lose a lot of those skills. Why is it that that group has those skills? Is it simply because they have developed those skills during their teaching career or were they given different training when they were doing undergraduate teaching courses? Why is it that we are in this situation? Why is it that younger teachers will not move on in the same way and have those skills?

**Mr Symons**—The opportunities to go back and do some training are nowhere near as available as they were when I was doing my training and when people who are younger than me were doing their training.

**Senator ALLISON**—So we are talking about 20 years ago?

**Mr Symons**—Yes. Also, there was a fairly solid squeeze on schools in Victoria about 10 years ago, and the first things to go were the special needs teachers, student welfare teachers in primary and secondary schools and people who took low-level English and this sort of stuff, and that stayed for about six years. In fact, there was no career path for anyone who did a special education course. That needs to change. I am not saying that regular primary school and secondary school teachers do not have the skills; many of them are outstanding. But if they were all given a package to start off with in their training, with the appropriate resources, the outcomes would be a lot better, and we would not be looking at the long-term cost to state and Commonwealth governments of students who do not have the skills to live in the community without causing some disruptions.

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**Senator ALLISON**—Can I ask you a difficult question—I think it is a difficult one.

**Mr Symons**—They have been easy ones, have they?

**Senator ALLISON**—How do the parents of the children in your school feel about their children being grouped with other students? For the parents of, let us say, a child with autism who may not have any outward signs of disability, is there an anxiety about their child mixing with children with the full range of other disabilities—very profound in some instances? Is that an anxiety?

**Mr Symons**—Yes.

**Senator ALLISON**—Is that one of the reasons parents want their child with autism to be in a mainstream school?

**Mr Symons**—Yes.

**Senator ALLISON**—It was not that difficult, after all!

**CHAIR**—There is an autism school in Niddrie, isn't there?

**Mr Symons**—Yes. There are three or four autism schools in Melbourne, but none outside the metro area.

**CHAIR**—Are there facilities available for you in Geelong?

**Mr Symons**—There is a unit in the other special school for students with a mild disability, but they only take about six kids.

**CHAIR**—Do you think we need more of those?

**Mr Symons**—Again, you would be segregating.

**Senator ALLISON**—That is the next bit of my question: do we go on to segregate more and more? Where do we go with inclusion? Do we have inclusion within disability as well as in the more general population?

**Mr Symons**—I do not think segregation is going to result in any benefits because at the end of the education stream everyone comes back into the community again and it is not a segregated community—although there may be some people who are segregationists in their own minds. I come back to the quality of the program. Parents may have a child with autism or mild intellectual disability with no outstanding physical features that demonstrate they have a disability. Yes, there is a frustration when they are in a class and there are a couple of kids there who do not look fantastic but, if the quality of the program is right and the parents see the benefits that their child is getting, they very quickly become an absolute advocate for the school. That is exactly what has happened to us—we have exploded.

**Mr Martin**—I just wanted to add to that. Our position is that we need to assess the needs of the child free from ideological, vogueish or any other kind of pattern, within the concept that where it works well inclusion is a very good method for those for whom it is appropriate. The difficulty that has sometimes arisen in the past is that parents have been persuaded, prior to any form of consultation, that a particular outcome is desirable. We need to get back to a conferencing system where we look at the wishes of the parents, the wishes and needs of the students, take in the professional expertise of people and work out what is best and how it will work best.

**Senator ALLISON**—I did have some other questions, but we are running out of time.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much for coming along and putting your views to us today.

**Proceedings suspended from 10.57 a.m. to 11.10 a.m.**

**KING, Ms Michelle Angela, Student Rights Officer, Monash Student Association**

**TOMILSON, Miss Rebecca Louise, President, Monash Student Association**

**CHAIR**—Welcome. The committee has before it submission No. 218. Are there any changes or corrections that you would like to make?

**Ms M. King**—No, thank you.

**CHAIR**—The committee prefer all evidence to be given in public, although we would 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.

**Miss Tomilson**—Thank you very much for your time to listen to our oral submission. I will give you a brief background on the organisation that I am representing. Its title is the Monash Student Association (Clayton). We are the peak student representative body on the largest campus of Australia's largest university. We were established in 1961 and incorporated in 1997. Our funding is chiefly derived from the compulsory amenities fee that every student on campus pays. With this funding we are able to be an independent service provider to students. We provide a huge range of services. We provide a range of specific services to minority groups such as postgraduate students, mature age students, part-time students and international students. We run over 100 clubs and societies. We have a student rights and advocacy service, a student welfare service, an activities department, a newspaper and a radio station. We also run a child-care service and a restaurant.

Our core priorities in representing the 22,000 students that are on our campus are to basically give the student voice to questions of education policy, to identify the unmet need in educational opportunities for students and to work to better those opportunities for all students on our campus. I will now pass over to Michelle, who will talk briefly to the submission. We will be happy to answer questions after that.

**Ms M. King**—The essence of MSA's submission to this inquiry is to try to capture the nature of the difficulties that students with disabilities encounter while trying to study. As I am sure you all remember—just as I remember, casting my mind back particularly to my undergraduate days—studying at a tertiary level is difficult at the best of times. Studying with a disability, particularly in the context of the overall public funding squeeze in higher education at the moment, is inordinately difficult. Our submission has really tried to capture the nature of this difficulty. We have presented a number of case studies, which I hope will bring to the inquiry some of the flavour of the huge difficulties that students with disabilities encounter on a daily basis.

These kinds of difficulties are manifest in the extra investment of time, energy and financial resources by students. They are also manifest in the time lags between identifying a need for a service or a support and the actual achievement of that service or support, in the significant capital infrastructure investment that students with disabilities are required to make in order to

succeed at a tertiary level and, of course, in the ongoing additional costs that students with disabilities suffer.

Three main factors are exacerbating this at the moment. At university level there are increasing numbers of students with disabilities coming through the system. The complexity and volatility of the nature of their disabilities is also on the increase, which makes it very difficult for the university to support these students. The growth in adaptive technologies for students, whilst giving them vast new numbers of opportunities to study at a tertiary level, also increase the costs significantly for students. Unfortunately, these costs seem primarily borne by the students themselves.

The balancing point in the Disability Discrimination Act is between support provided by the university and undue hardship placed upon the university in trying to provide this support. In the context of the overall public funding squeeze, this balancing point has unfortunately but inevitably shifted back towards the student which of course places yet more cost on the student and more stress on the student as well. Many disabled students cannot bear any of this further cost, and this is particularly the case in the light of the overall cost shifting to students in the tertiary sector which has been established quite well in recent times through a great deal of research through student associations and bodies such as the National Union of Students.

There is also a huge incidence of students with disabilities suffering a dual disadvantage. Of course, the problem of costs towards students is further exacerbated by issues surrounding income support and the decreased capacity of students with disabilities to work in order to supplement their incomes. MSA believes that all of this then becomes a contravention of the spirit of the Disability Discrimination Act, whereby students are receiving a level of support which is unacceptable and inadequate.

Students with disabilities are amongst the most vulnerable cohorts in Australia's citizenry. A policy setting that at a rhetorical level discusses support but at a practical level expects students to bear the cost that they are bearing at the moment can only lead to perverse outcomes. Our recommendations incorporate a huge range financing issues but, equally important, our recommendations incorporate issues around bringing the voice of students into the core of policy process. We are happy to answer any questions you have for us.

**CHAIR**—My reading of the current Higher Education Funding Act—the Commonwealth funding act—suggests to me that the Commonwealth is likely to spend perhaps as much as \$24½ billion over the next four years on universities. I might also add it is likely to spend a good deal more than that on private schools in the same period. But it is still a very substantial sum of money. Of that, the new disabilities program has \$8 million allocated to it. Those seem to be the proportions: \$24.5 billion in total and \$8 million for disabilities. I also note that in the coming year that figure will only be \$1.8 million. How much of that money do you actually see at Monash?

**Ms M. King**—I can take that question on notice and have it reviewed for you. Whilst I cannot give you the dollar figure this morning—and I am sorry that I cannot do that for you—the question is whether or not the amount is adequate. From the perspective of the students that we have spoken to at length in order to prepare this submission, the moneys coming through for the support are not adequate, and I think we have outlined for you in a fairly significant amount of detail the size of that inadequacy. I will take the question of the dollar figure on notice.

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**CHAIR**—It was put to us that in regard to Monash specifically there is considerable concern about the disability liaison personnel you have. A submission we have received says that the independence of the disability liaison officers has been brought into question. It was put to us that the primary function of the DLOs at Monash is in fact to prevent the university from engaging in legal action—or, to avoid legal action—rather than ensuring the needs of students with disabilities are adequately met. Do you think that is a fair comment?

**Ms M. King**—I think the comment is exaggerated. The disability liaison staff, as individuals, have a huge commitment to doing their absolute best to support students with disabilities. You may note, however, that the office has not made a submission to this inquiry and also that the university has not made a submission to this inquiry. I think that that is reflective of the university's overall position on how it deals with its students with disabilities. It is a poor reflection that it is up to the student association to bring matters about disability support to the attention of the inquiry.

On an individual level, the staff are extremely dedicated and were extremely supportive of us in making this submission. However, they walk a very fine line with the university and they try as best they can to incorporate the support they have and the support they can offer within a very limited budget. I think students really do feel the sharp end of that and sometimes students potentially confuse the political arrangements within the university, whereby the overall structure of the university does not lend itself to an adequate level of student support and the budget is just not there. From our perspective, the fault lines are certainly not with the individual DLO support staff, because they are excellent.

**CHAIR**—Fair enough. We had a verbal submission yesterday from a student with MS who also had a serious language difficulty in terms of her command of English. She indicated to us that it took her a couple of years to get assistance from the university administration. Do you think that sort of experience is common?

**Ms M. King**—I think a couple of years is unusual, but there is an absolute metanarrative amongst all of the students we spoke to about significant time lags between identifying their need and receiving the adequate level of support.

**CHAIR**—We are talking about the largest university in Australia.

**Ms M. King**—We are indeed.

**CHAIR**—This is fairly damning criticism.

**Ms M. King**—As I said, the metanarrative was about time lags—the time lags that we encountered were more of the order of the best part of a semester.

**CHAIR**—Notwithstanding that you are not in a position to represent the university as such but are here to represent students—

**Ms M. King**—That is right.

**CHAIR**—from your point of view, what performance indicators are currently used at the university in relation to the provision of disability services?

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**Ms M. King**—Again, that is a question I can take on notice. I think that the Disability Liaison Office works within an extremely limited budget, as I was saying. Because of the limitation of its budgets, the capacity it has to support students can be quite ad hoc. Whether or not it has internal mechanisms or key performance indicators is something I would have to take on notice.

**CHAIR**—If you wouldn't mind. While you are at it, could you give us an indication of how adequate you think these are and what measures you would like to see introduced, to give us a better picture of the situation.

**Ms M. King**—Yes.

**Senator ALLISON**—I am interested in the figures you have provided the committee with. Thank you for those. I am somewhat surprised, I might say. I wonder if you can comment on whether Monash reflects the general community with regard to learning disability. You have given us a figure of 53 people out of the 344 who have learning disabilities. I tried quickly to do the mathematics, but I cannot without my calculator. But it seems to me a very low percentage of your general population of 42,000 students altogether. You quote in one of your case studies a woman with dyslexia. Given that some of the estimates are that there are 10 to 20 per cent of the general population with dyslexia, how do you explain that such a small percentage of students have been identified as such, or are they excluded from the system?

**Ms M. King**—There are a number of issues there. The figure you take is from table 1 on page 12. This table is reflective of the people who actively seek out support from the disability liaison unit. At student enrolment, students are asked to nominate if they self-identify as having a disability.

**Senator ALLISON**—I can understand that. My question to you is: is it just an underidentification or are students with learning disabilities not getting into university?

**Ms M. King**—I think it is both those things.

**Senator ALLISON**—And would you like to put a figure on where this problem is?

**Ms M. King**—I do not have sufficient knowledge to quantify that for you, but there is certainly an argument that studying at a tertiary level is inordinately difficult and, despite the massification of the system, there is still something about it being a very elite end of the education system. I think that students coming through their primary and secondary years with learning disabilities may well be discouraged from looking at tertiary education as a viable option for them, particularly if they have had negative experiences throughout their earlier years. If those negative experiences are then manifested to the extent that they do not have the capacity to come to university, it becomes a problem.

The other issue with these figures is that the DLU can only support full degree program students. As you are no doubt aware, there are a number of students who come through alternative pathways who may be doing open learning, single subject enrolments or things like that. So, between the students who do not seek out the support, students who are independent in their support requirements and then the students who are doing alternative programs, the

number would be significantly larger. But there is certainly a more general issue about the barriers to entry for people with learning disabilities.

**Senator ALLISON**—The committee has had a lot of evidence about the lack of undergraduate, postgraduate or in-service professional development or training for teachers in terms of dealing with disabilities. My guess is that university lecturers get absolutely none and are probably not looking for any. Can you comment on that, and do you think it would be worth while providing professional development for university lecturers, tutors and the like?

**Ms M. King**—Monash does have a program whereby all new academic staff, new academic appointments, need to go through a graduate certificate in tertiary teaching. I would be extremely surprised if that graduate certificate does not at least nod at issues around disabilities. But obviously the time lag between introducing such a program and all academic staff having such training is enormous. In addition, students with disabilities—and, indeed, students generally—encounter many of their difficulties at university with the general and administration staff, so there is an issue with both academic staff and general administration staff.

Support training and training generally for staff who need to encounter students with disabilities is a huge issue at Monash. It is something that the Disabilities Liaison Office has identified as a problem they would like to address. Unfortunately, they do not have the staff or funding to be able to do so adequately. That is certainly an issue of major concern to the student association as well. It is incorporated within our recommendations that seed money coming from the federal government as project funding for this sort of thing would be excellent in the tertiary environment. These issues are particularly exacerbated by the growing volatility and increasing complexity of disabilities. We have more and more people—although the numbers are quite low—through with learning disabilities, with issues around mental illness or so forth, that are just not dealt with particularly well in the tertiary environment.

**Senator ALLISON**—Monash University was set up 30 years ago now, wasn't it?

**Ms M. King**—Forty.

**Senator ALLISON**—Time flies! Obviously some of its buildings will not have taken into account physical access needs. How seriously is the university taking the refurbishment of buildings in order to make physical accessibility a priority?

**Ms M. King**—This is primarily a personal opinion, but I think Monash's problems lie in the issues of ongoing support, providing appropriate adaptive technology, and central issues around teaching and learning. I think the university deals relatively well—although not perfectly, by any means—with issues around physical access. They are far simpler issues, and there is a reasonable capital infrastructure line item in the university's budget to deal with this on an ongoing basis. It is hardly perfect—there are again significant time lags between the identification of the need and the structural changes being made to a building—but also, obviously, in architectural plans for new buildings these sorts of things are incorporated. I think the least of Monash's worries is the issue of physical access.

**Miss Tomilson**—Also, when we are talking about physical access to buildings, one thing to take into account is the fact that class sizes are ever on the increase at Monash. I have talked to many students with disabilities who have had real difficulty accessing their classes because the

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size of the classes is so huge or the size of the lecture is so large that there are not enough seats—or even just getting into the lecture theatre itself is a real issue.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much for coming today. It has been good.



[11.31 a.m.]

**FATHERS, Mr Martin Keith, Manager, Disability Liaison Unit, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University**

**MARTIN, Ms Lin, Vice-Principal and Academic Registrar, University of Melbourne**

**McLEAN, Dr Patricia, General Manager, Equity and Learning Programs, University of Melbourne**

**CHAIR**—I welcome representatives from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and the University of Melbourne. The committee has before it submissions Nos 129 and 186. Are there any changes or corrections that you would like to make?

**Ms Martin**—I do not wish to make any changes to the submission from Melbourne University.

**Mr Fathers**—And I do not need to make any changes to the submission from RMIT.

**CHAIR**—I invite you to make a brief opening statement.

**Mr Fathers**—I am representing RMIT University, which is a cross-sectoral university of some 55,000 students, some 6,000 of which are international students. About 1,600 of the students have registered on their enrolment forms as students with disabilities. The Disability Liaison Unit currently provides about 250 hours of interpretive support per week and 400 hours of note-taking support per week. Funding through government is insufficient from the point of view of the TAFE sector. RMIT receive about \$230,000 through the disability support fund, which is based on a submission which met about 35 per cent of the actual costs. The federal government is introducing a new funding source, which is commencing this year. We have not used it yet; we do not know what proportion of the funds that are submitted will be received. It will be for costs over \$500 per student. The Disability Liaison Unit employs one manager, one disability officer, one assistant disability officer, a coordinator of disability support workers and two admin officers. I should probably finish there and wait for questions.

**Ms Martin**—I am speaking for the University of Melbourne and I will speak mainly to the points in the submission, which you have already received. The first point I would like to make is the large increase in the number of students who are reporting with disabilities in our enrolment profile. Over the last 10 years—and this is not atypical for any university in Australia—the numbers have increased sixfold. Over the last four years, they have increased by nearly 60 per cent. Over the same period of time, the amount of expenditure on support for students with disabilities that has been provided by the University of Melbourne has increased by 140 per cent. The reason for highlighting that issue is to indicate that we are experiencing not only increases in the numbers of students with disabilities but also a significant increase in the number of students with very severe disabilities that require considerable additional support to enable them to succeed in their programs of study.

The university uses a needs based model in which individuals are assessed—and, I suppose, prioritised, within the constraints of the Disability Discrimination Act and state legislation—for the provision of support services to them. That takes into account medical and other evidence about the person's disability and also factors like their socioeconomic status, the level of skills that they have already been able to obtain to assist them in coping with their disability in an educational environment, and their access to adaptive technologies and other accessible environments.

What we have noticed is that there is an increasing proportion of students with disabilities now coming into our postgraduate courses. This is a very positive outcome of the programs that have been in place over several years, but it means that there is an even greater demand for more sophisticated support requirements. The other difference in the student profile for students with disabilities is a significant increase in the number of students with learning disabilities or mental health problems that require quite specialised support within the university.

I think that the key issues for us as a university involve the provision of adequate and appropriate direct support for the number of students that are presenting. At the University of Melbourne, those numbers in 2001 were about 550 students out of a total student population of about 35,000. We have an access rate, which is the rate at which students with disabilities commence higher education, of nearly 2.9 per cent, compared with the national figure of 2.6 per cent, so we are recording slightly above the national average in that area.

Another issue that we think is important—it was a feature of our submission—is that it is about not only providing higher education services but assisting the students to cope with the transition and to move into employment after their higher education experience. There is also the issue that was mentioned in the previous session: professional development for our staff and improving the awareness of staff members and the remainder of the student community of the issues that confront students with disabilities.

Our major concerns include the capacity of the university to provide adequate support on the amount of funds that are available, both those provided within the university budget and those that come to the university from the Commonwealth and other services. The difficulty in providing material in a timely fashion, particularly for vision impaired students, is an issue that we are doing something about; I can provide more information on that if it is of interest to the inquiry. In our services, what we would like to improve on is the use of technology and technological aids in addressing some of the issues that confront students with disabilities.

**CHAIR**—Ms Martin, did you say 850 or 550 students?

**Ms Martin**—There were 550 in 2001. That was the figure quoted in our submission.

**CHAIR**—Would RMIT have 2,000 students with disabilities?

**Mr Fathers**—It is about 1,600. Remember that we are cross-sectoral, so we have a large TAFE component and a higher education component.

**CHAIR**—So, with the TAFE component included, would it come up to 2,000?

**Mr Fathers**—No. Looking at my figures here, I see that 966 students registered from the TAFE sector and 818 from the higher education sector. That was for last year.

**CHAIR**—Whichever way you cut those figures, there are substantially more at RMIT than at Melbourne University. Why is that? Can you account for that?

**Ms Martin**—There are differences in the level of educational background and the level of achievement required to enter the University of Melbourne. As has been indicated in our documentation, while we have the targeted access program, which targets and provides some moderation of entry requirements for students with a disability, the level of achievement that is required to enter the University of Melbourne and the assessment made by the university is based on the likely capacity of the student to succeed at the university if they take advantage of the support services provided. Without wishing to diminish RMIT's achievements, it is much more competitive to get into programs at the University of Melbourne.

**CHAIR**—So you are saying that it is a product of the TER score, not discrimination?

**Ms Martin**—Yes, indeed. Our access statistic shows that we are slightly above the national average in Australian higher education in spite of the University of Melbourne being the most elite university in terms of the entry requirements and standards.

**CHAIR**—I noticed in the other submissions that there was a discussion about the inconsistency of the approaches taken in regard to criteria and definitions for assessing disability. I did not see much about that in your submission. Is there a reason for that?

**Ms Martin**—No. I think we did address the issue of the criteria. We have indicated that, in terms of providing support for students, we used the definitions as they are described in the Disability Discrimination Act. We collect the data that is required of every student enrolling in a higher education course in Australia. There are three questions related to self-disclosure: a question about whether you have a long-term medical condition or some sort of impairment that might have an impact on your study, a question about whether you require or are interested in accessing any services provided and a question about the type of disability.

For my sins, I am the person who worked many years ago on developing the higher education sector performance measures and that definition. So I have consulted widely with the disability community about that. I think you have to be very careful about which definition you use; we have more students reporting to our Disability Liaison Unit that they require assistance than is indicated by the number of students who self-declare on the enrolment form. So the first point of your term of reference about appropriate definitions is a very pertinent one and one that probably does need some more attention. The work that I was referring to was done in 1994.

**CHAIR**—Mr Fathers, I note the RMIT submission has similarities with the Disability Advisory Council's submission—and that does not surprise me. I did ask you some questions yesterday about those matters; we are not neglecting your submission. I do highlight that you say that the university is concerned about the Commonwealth's ending the cooperative projects in the Higher Education Equity Fund initiative, which had over half a billion dollars in 1999. Why do you regret that program being ended?

**Mr Fathers**—That particular cooperative project was an opportunity for institutions to work in coordination to identify best practice and to promulgate that to the rest of the tertiary education community. It was research done by disability liaison officers for students in the tertiary sector. Some very powerful research came out of it, which has informed a lot of us—and the work that we do from day to day. I understand that that money was used for another initiative but that has stopped the source of funds for that research.

**CHAIR**—Was that research useful in evaluating the effectiveness of programs at universities?

**Mr Fathers**—Yes, I believe it was. I think it was effective in evaluating, but even more so in finding out where best practice was actually being carried out and then ensuring that other people became aware of that best practice and how that could be instituted in the other universities.

**CHAIR**—Can you explain to me the performance indicators used at RMIT and at Melbourne to assess the effectiveness of the programs undertaken at your universities?

**Mr Fathers**—A broad question. Clearly, one of the things that we have to do—

**CHAIR**—It is just that in the DEST everything that moves, I have noticed, seems to have a performance indicator attached to it. Have your programs got a performance indicator attached to them at RMIT?

**Mr Fathers**—Probably not.

**CHAIR**—It is not such a broad question. I think it is a very specific question. What are the performance indicators?

**Mr Fathers**—I think we clearly measure the success of our intervention by the success of the student. One of the problems there is that you cannot always say that a student completing a program is in itself a success. Some students mainly come and do two or three courses or subjects. But clearly, the outcome for the student is the measure of the success of our intervention.

**Ms Martin**—I have a similar response in one respect in that we use the indicators of success and retention, the characteristics of the students, and their relative performance compared with students without disabilities in the university. Our targets are to improve those rates. At present they are around 88 per cent of the general student population, which means that the pass rates of students and their attendance and their return to study from one year to the next is about 88 per cent as good as the general student population. That is a fairly low percentage, not necessarily compared with other Australian higher education institutions but compared with other equity groups that are traditionally part of the assessment. We use the way those performance indicators move to target particular strategies. For example, if retention is not as good as the pass rates then we need to look at issues about why students are not returning from one year to the next, which may be concerned with other factors like socioeconomic status as opposed to their success in their studies. So we look at a combination of those. We evaluate all of our programs. We ask for student opinion about services and we do awareness surveys as to how

aware the general student population and the staff of the university are with regard to the services provided by the university. So that would be the range of indicators.

**CHAIR**—Thank you, Ms Martin. But there is nothing specific you can point me to and say, ‘Here are the performance indicators by which the programs will be evaluated.’

**Ms Martin**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—Could we have a copy? Is that possible?

**Ms Martin**—Yes, we could provide you with that. We have a disability action plan where there are indicators, and part of our equity performance reporting every year to the government includes those indicators.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much. Does RMIT have a similar—

**Mr Fathers**—We do have an action plan. Our action plan is undergoing a renewal at the moment but I would certainly be happy to provide—

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much. And the action plan is specific enough to actually evaluate individual programs?

**Mr Fathers**—In the case of RMIT we have a strategy plan, the operating strategy that we are using day to day which actually does identify that.

**Ms Martin**—More broad level than the specific components of the—

**CHAIR**—Thank you. I notice that the Melbourne submission says that the university cannot afford to comply with the law.

**Ms Martin**—We cannot in a short period of time comply totally with the requirements—for example, building compliance for access. We have an extended program but, as you would be aware, the University of Melbourne is coming up to its 150th anniversary and a lot of our buildings are heritage listed. While we have worked extensively to provide what we would call ‘partial access’, in many of the buildings you cannot actually change the physical shape and we are not permitted to put lifts or so forth in to get access to upper levels in some of the older buildings. At the moment we estimate that about 40 per cent of the buildings are still not fully compliant.

**CHAIR**—Is that the only area where you would say that you could not afford to meet the requirements of the law?

**Ms Martin**—I think it is a question obviously of where the university puts its priorities. It is not accurate to say that the university does not have sufficient resources in one respect—

**CHAIR**—I was going to come to that.

**Ms Martin**—but what I would like to say is that the university contributes vastly more—in fact three times more—to the provision of specific support services for students with disabilities compared with what we get from the government HEEP grant and additional funding. That obviously comes from our general operating grants which are now—and I am sure I do not need to remind the members of the inquiry—only a fairly minor proportion, about 40 per cent, of the university’s total budget. So we have additional demands on us from students with disabilities that are coming in through fee paying programs, and particularly international students, and we are finding that is another area where there are considerable demands being placed on a fairly limited budget. The University of Melbourne funds a Disability Liaison Unit, which is in my area of responsibility. It provides in the order of \$250,000 additional funding per year on top of the HEEP grant for the provision of disability services. So there is a significant commitment but there are a lot of other priorities as well.

**CHAIR**—Sure. You are right to point out the inadequacy of the HEEP grant—I have done that myself this morning. However, given the emphasis that the administration at the university places upon deregulation, philanthropy and private funding, do you think this is an area that is likely to attract significant private support?

**Ms Martin**—I think it is an area, and the university submission to the Nelson review makes it clear that the university equates equity and access as equally important issues around quality—

**CHAIR**—That is the university’s view and I would be shocked to hear any education administrator say anything different to a Senate inquiry. My question went to the capacity to raise private funds for these particular purposes.

**Ms Martin**—The funds that are provided additional to the support funds at the moment are a significant proportion of the budget and are raised from international and local student fees as well as other sources. We provide services to the students in accordance with the Disability Discrimination Act out of a proportion of the fees that flow from my department. So, yes, I believe that we will earmark that and—

**CHAIR**—You will have sufficient funds to meet your obligations under the act?

**Ms Martin**—I would hope so. As I said, I think we are moving towards definitely trying to meet those obligations. The question is the escalation, as I have indicated in my introductory remarks. The growth in the amount of resources required to provide support services has tripled compared with the increase in the number of students with disabilities. Students coming to us from secondary schools now have very high expectations and in fact often it is difficult to match those expectations at the tertiary level from the sorts of resources that we can provide.

**CHAIR**—Mr Fathers, do you think that RMIT meets its legal obligations?

**Mr Fathers**—Absolutely.

**CHAIR**—It does?

**Mr Fathers**—There is no question about that. I say that because one of the groups that, for some reason, has been attracted to RMIT is the profoundly deaf community. There is a very

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large group of people there now, and per capita you are looking at between \$35,000 and \$40,000 per student for support. The university has never indicated any concern about the fact that there is such a large consumption of funds to support that group of students.

**CHAIR**—The Working Men’s College has been there for a long time—you have old heritage buildings.

**Mr Fathers**—We have actually dealt with those. In 1998 we had an external audit performed of all our buildings. There were about \$10.6 million worth of potentially discriminatory processes that came out of that. They were accepted by the university as part of the strategic master plan, and they are being addressed over a five- to 10-year period. There is \$500,000 a year which is made available to my office, in conjunction with the university architect, to deal with hot spots as they come up. I think the university has done a phenomenal job, considering the heritage buildings and so on. It is still not 100 per cent, but it will be.

**CHAIR**—How do you explain the contrast in the approaches that have been taken?

**Mr Fathers**—I think you just quoted it, with the Working Men’s College. RMIT has over 100 years plus taken the view that it is just that—a working man’s college—and it has a very strong equity view which it pursues vigorously.

**CHAIR**—I was wondering how Melbourne University responds to that quite sharp contrast in evidence.

**Ms Martin**—I think the profile of the buildings is in fact different, and I have worked at RMIT previously. The proportion of heritage listed buildings is very different with the two campuses, even though the age of the campuses—

**CHAIR**—How much money do you reckon Melbourne University would need to bring it up to meet its obligations under the act?

**Ms Martin**—I could not make that assessment at the moment, I would have to seek advice from the Property and Buildings Department.

**CHAIR**—Has that been done, do you think?

**Ms Martin**—We certainly have done an audit, and there is another one due. We are drafting our disability action plan at the moment, and one of the initiatives as part of that will be a revised audit. Each year work is proceeding; it is not as if we have said we cannot do this, it is just that there are priorities. I have recently had an experience myself of being in a wheelchair for eight weeks following surgery, and I am well aware of the challenges of getting around the campus at the University of Melbourne from a physical disability point of view.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much.

**Senator ALLISON**—Mr Fathers, could I come to the question in your submission of convincing people who have no interest or enthusiasm for teaching students with a disability to attend training. I think we have had evidence which suggests that, particularly in the non-

government sector, the schools that do well in serving the needs of students with disabilities have the double bind of being a great attraction to parents. So the balance, if you like, gets out of kilter with other mainstream schools. Is that a reason for teachers to be reluctant to seek training in this area?

**Mr Fathers**—I did not suggest that the teachers are reluctant to seek training. I think how I actually put it was that quite often you are preaching to the converted when you are doing professional development. I think there is a slightly different skew on that—not wishing to question you. Teaching staff, certainly in the tertiary sector, are working extremely hard with higher student numbers, higher contact hours and so on. There is a lot of call on their time for various different things. You have to have a particular interest in supporting students who are ‘different’—if you are going to take on that universal access view—and make the time to attend professional development.

In the school sector it is slightly different. Because of the move towards the specialised teachers—you do specialised training on top of your standard Bachelor of Education—it is a bit different. One of the previous speakers was talking about the promotional system that needs to be reviewed in that area. There is a difference in the tertiary education sector.

**Senator ALLISON**—Nonetheless, you do say that one of the biggest professional development problems is attracting teachers. What disability courses are available for teachers in the tertiary sector?

**Mr Fathers**—In terms of disability, there are a number of postgraduate courses that are available both at certificate level and at masters level. I know that at RMIT there is actually a masters in disability studies. I think at Deakin there are a number of postgraduate courses available. Remember, people who teach in tertiary education are not necessarily teachers per se; they are people who may have an expertise in a particular theoretical or practical area who then come to teach. There has been a big move over the most recent years in getting those staff into various programs. For instance, there is one—which I think is called VET teaching—in the TAFE sector which provides people with some of that pedagogical understanding and the curriculum development issues.

**Senator ALLISON**—One of your recommendations is that there be professional registration for disability liaison officers. What problem would registration solve?

**Mr Fathers**—I think it would solve a number of problems. One of the difficulties with the current system throughout Australia is that disability liaison officers are seen at different levels and different levels of expertise, and they may be seen as an administration level, as meeting just the needs of the DDA—of the act itself—or as people actually involved in introducing strategic change, for instance. If you have a standard understanding of what capacity a DLO should have and what training, experience and knowledge they should have, then I think there is a better likelihood that the role that they play can be valued more, to the benefit of students.

**Senator ALLISON**—So there are no standard qualifications or criteria for disability liaison officers?

**Mr Fathers**—No. They are being developed. I think I have made mention—if I have not, I should—of the TEDCA submission. The TEDCA submission does go into this issue in some

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detail, and it is very useful in looking at this whole idea of how we professionalise the DLO area. And it is a crucial area.

**Senator ALLISON**—One of the recurring issues for tertiary education seems to be instructional material, particularly for people with low vision. We have a submission, which we will deal with a little later, from the National Information and Library Service, and they point to the situation in the US where there is a new system coming forward which may standardise formats and so on and essentially call on publishers to provide material at the point of publication. Can you indicate whether your two institutions have arrangements with other universities, here or elsewhere, so that there is no duplication of translations to braille, for instance? To what extent do you share information and resources in order to provide for this group?

**Mr Fathers**—This is a very vexed area. Both of us have recently attended a fairly large seminar/workshop in Sydney looking at this particular issue. Section 508 of the rehabilitation act, which NILS is referring to there, is a major move because it places the responsibility for published materials back on the publishers. Any text that is actually published by the publishers is registered in a central repository. At RMIT we have been struggling with this whole issue for a number of years. The RVIB, who are now part of NILS, were doing all the alternative format materials, and we were getting delays of three to four months at least. The particular difficulty there was that, trying to do them in-house, you could not guarantee the quality of the material, particularly of things like braille.

RMIT has been working recently on linking with the publishers through a contact in NSW who is responsible for all materials that are published in America. We are making a request to the publishers through them, so that electronic materials are made available to the student in a timely manner. Once the material is available in electronic format it is easier for the student to then—with a braille and so on—utilise braille, large print, the screen reader or whatever else.

It is still not super smooth—it has a long way to go. Students, quite rightly, are not happy with some of the difficulties with published material. All material that are provided or produced by the university has to be available in electronic format, either on an electronic system—a DLS server system—where students can download that material or have it provided directly to them. The difficulty is not that; it is the published material. Do we exchange information? Certainly, the TAFE Disability Network and the Victorian Higher Education Disability Network have immense discussions about this issue, looking at how we can share resources and how we can learn from each other. Clearly, one of the difficulties is that you cannot guarantee that a given course in a university—or TAFE college if it comes to that—will use the same materials, particularly the published materials.

**Senator ALLISON**—There must be some very commonly used texts?

**Mr Fathers**—Far less than you would expect; and it depends on the academic concerned. I know that previously there were other institutions that used to have a library of materials, such as Deakin University in Warrnambool, but I believe that went back to NILS as part of the centralising of NILS. I am not sure if I answered your question exactly.

**Senator ALLISON**—Do you need to add to that, Ms Martin?

**Ms Martin**—I think Martin has outlined the extent of consultations very adequately. The only things that I would like to add are to endorse his comments, and say that our experience has been that the students who have visual impairment are scattered through a range of courses and the requirements are often very specific. They have a preferred format for their alternative format materials. Sometimes, even if there are other materials available, they are not in the particular format that the individual has nominated they need assistance with for their studies. The key issue for us has been the timeliness and the provision of such materials. There are internal issues as well as the external ones that Martin has referred to, such as the time it takes to get these alternative format materials from some of the external providers of those services.

The University of Melbourne has recognised that there is an issue about the timeliness with which we provide course reading lists and so forth for each subject. We have in fact been developing some policies and procedures that we expect to go to our academic board within the next month, to try to improve our internal academic management aspects to enable earlier notification of these materials. But they are often quite idiosyncratic materials in terms of both the student's disability and the particular subject or course that the student is involved with.

**Senator ALLISON**—Finally, how would you rate your institution's capacity for lecturers to be providing material in appropriate formats? I am referring to hearing and vision impairment. What is the level of awareness of the need to meet the needs of those students?

**Ms Martin**—I believe the level of awareness at Melbourne is quite high. We have had a couple of cases where this has been an issue, and this is why we are bringing it to the attention of the academic board. I would expect awareness to be very high—between 80 and 90 per cent, say.

**Senator ALLISON**—Maybe I should not have said 'awareness' but 'compliance with' or 'provision of'.

**Ms Martin**—On compliance: the materials are always provided but it is the timeliness that is the issue, and sometimes that is affected by external matters as well. We are trying to make sure that reading lists and material produced by lecturers is of sufficient quality to enable proper scanning, transcription and all of the things that need to happen. If you are talking about ultimate compliance, it is extremely high—we do it all the time. It is the time within which we do it; and when we cannot do it speedily we give the student special dispensation in terms of either more time to submit assignments or delayed examinations and so forth. So the compliance is good; the issues that HREOC have identified are around the timeliness and trying to get a more cooperative approach to it across the sector.

**Senator ALLISON**—Ms Martin, you talked about the 88 per cent lower retention rate for students with disabilities. Have you done exit surveys of those students to find out why they do not keep up or why they leave?

**Ms Martin**—I would have to get advice from my colleague.

**Dr McLean**—A project is being developed at the moment that looks at this issue specifically but, in addition to that, students registered with the Disability Liaison Unit are surveyed about their satisfaction with the services they receive. Satisfaction levels have been quite high: on a

five-point scale, 4.3 and 4.2 were the ratings of the last two that I remember. Within that survey, they are given an opportunity to comment on specific concerns that they may have.

**CHAIR**—I do not mean to be facetious, but I have yet to find a student satisfaction survey that has not shown enormous satisfaction with the university. It is a bit like the teachers who come before us who tell us about the satisfaction that parents have with them. Do you think that is an unfair comment?

**Ms Martin**—The course experience questionnaire shows a great diversity of level of satisfaction.

**CHAIR**—Fair enough!

**Ms Martin**—I am not aware of us doing specific exit surveys if students do not return. Is that right, Dr McLean?

**Dr McLean**—Two years ago we did one with the University of Melbourne and Ballarat which was called ‘Staying in there’. It was an exit survey of all equity students, including students with disabilities.

**Ms Martin**—So I am wrong. There was something done, but it has not been repeated. The other surveys about student satisfaction are conducted annually, and they are the ones I referred to earlier.

**CHAIR**—Are they a part of this pro-forma?

**Ms Martin**—No. They are separate ones done by the university. We have a quality of student support services survey that relates to all areas of student support, not only disability liaison.

**Senator ALLISON**—You may not be able to remember, but did the Ballarat survey indicate that people with disabilities were leaving their courses because of difficulties with lecturers or provision of materials?

**Dr McLean**—The results were fascinating in that they were quite different between the smaller regional university and the larger metropolitan one. So the responses from students were quite different, but in both cases course match was the major issue.

**Senator ALLISON**—What is course match?

**Dr McLean**—Students choosing courses that really did not match their needs.

**Senator ALLISON**—What does that suggest with regard to people with disabilities?

**Dr McLean**—It is an issue for all students, but for students with disabilities course advice in years 11 and 12 is vital.

**Senator ALLISON**—You mean that they are in a course and they discover that it is not for them and wish they had done something else?

**Dr McLean**—Yes.

**Ms Martin**—That relates to retention.

**Senator ALLISON**—Is this different for people with disabilities, compared with the general population?

**Mr Fathers**—I think the real issue is on the inherent requirement for courses, and it is something that a lot of us have been working on for some time. We need to know what are the real requirements in a full program. That information needs to be available to a student prior to commencing a program. I will give you an example: in a social worker program, the first time that a student goes out to work in an integrated placement is in the third year. It is not until then they find out that their disability is going to prevent them from completing the course. I remember yesterday that people were talking about information not being made available. This is a case where we need to do a lot more work in providing information at the very start of a program, when students are selecting the program that they want to be involved in.

**CHAIR**—I thank the witnesses very much for coming here today.

**Proceedings suspended from 12.14 p.m. to 1.34 p.m.**

[1.34 p.m.]

**EVANS, Ms Jane Susan, General Manager, National Information and Library Service**

**IEZZI, Mr Tony David, Materials Production Coordinator Melbourne, National Information Library Service**

**CHAIR**—Welcome. The committee has before it submission No. 174. Are there any changes or corrections that you would like to make?

**Ms Evans**—No, thank you.

**CHAIR**—The committee prefers all evidence to be given in public, although the committee would 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 Evans**—Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the hearing this afternoon. I will read from a prepared statement, of which I have provided copies to the committee. I would like to draw a comparison between the infrastructure that is established to assist sighted students compared with those who have a print disability. Sighted students attending university are able to use all the facilities available for accessing information: the campus library, the Internet, microfiche and nominated course books to name a few. The Internet provides a wealth of information on just about any subject. It is always interactive, sometimes dynamic in that material can be downloaded and used by a student, and nearly always highly visual. Similarly, textbooks used are sourced from around the world and are often graphic in presentation, using colour diagrams, display text and so on. There are a large number of web page producers and publishers with significant investments in the latest technology and machinery that are dedicated to the production of this material for students. Many millions of dollars are invested and spent every year.

By comparison, often students with a print disability must make do with textbooks produced by organisations that rely on charity to exist where production equipment is often out of date and inadequate for today's information demands and production deadlines, where people in the wider community in the production process are often volunteers, are sometimes inadequately trained and have limited knowledge of the original subject matter, where production of graphical material diagrams, maps et cetera are so complex that drawing software cannot cope and good production standbys, such as string, are employed to create raised line drawings, and where material is often not produced to standards and guidelines. For example, a web page can be inaccessible to blind students if not designed to appropriate standards.

While there are skilled staff with knowledge of braille codes for subjects such as maths, chemistry, physics and music, there are not enough of them. Recruitment is difficult and subsequent training ad hoc. Training is often on the job, and it takes years of production experience to be able to cope with transcribing some of the print material prepared today. The production process is labour intensive and therefore time consuming and costly. Students with print disabilities may require several different formats for different material. It might be braille,

audio, e-text, large print and so on. Each item produced is more or less tailored to an individual student, so there is little opportunity to gain the economies of scale from large production runs. In addition, the equipment a student has access to or is able to use impacts on what format materials that the student needs can be produced in. There is no equivalent to the printed word standard format as with textbooks.

Although universities provide adaptive equipment for students with disabilities, it is often useless to the students because they have not been trained in how to use it during secondary schooling years. Universities are funded to provide assistance to students with disabilities, both with disability liaison officers or similar staff and for the production of alternative format materials. An increasing number of universities are producing their own alternative format materials for students and, in some cases, this has been successful; but there is evidence that universities are not providing formats that students can work with effectively, and this is having a significant detrimental impact on the success or even the completion of their studies.

Production of materials by universities can be limited in the range of formats available and is often determined by cost or the lack of qualified staff. It is not necessarily produced to recognised production standards for alternative formats. The duplication of already produced material in alternative format is possible because not all material is placed on the national bibliographic database, so there is no way to determine if material has been produced previously and a master exists. The production of alternative format materials is fragmented in its approach, leading to duplication of effort, waste of scarce and costly resources and an inability to leverage new digital technologies because of the high costs involved.

In May this year the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission held a forum to discuss the issues involved in the production of alternative format materials. As a result of that forum, the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee and the commission are establishing a working party to consider the recommendations arising from the forum. One of these is to investigate the feasibility of a national approach to the acquisition and production of accessible materials for students.

The National Information and Library Service fully supports this initiative. People with a print disability participating in tertiary education will be participating on an equal basis only when study materials are available to them at the same time as a print book is available to a sighted student; the material is accessible for study purposes—that is, it is transportable and it is easily navigated; the source material is available from publishers in a standard electronic format; students have access to, and are able to use, adaptive technologies with which to access and use this material directly from managed databases; publishers and producers are able to leverage emerging digital technologies to hold, present and deliver material; the production of alternative formats is recognised as an integral part of the education infrastructure and funded adequately, and there is an accepted mechanism to record all material produced in an alternative format and to allow access to and reproduction of that material so that duplication and waste can be avoided.

The National Information and Library Service recommends that the AVCC-HREOC initiative is funded to complete a feasibility study to develop a national approach embracing universities, publishers, producers and libraries for the acquisition and production of alternative format materials that will meet these needs in a cost effective, efficient and timely way.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much. I have been doing some work with the Royal Institute for the Blind with regard to the provision of alternative materials for the visually impaired, and my essential understanding of the services that are available is that there are three points: personal note taking services, alternative print services and adaptive technology services. When we talk to Commonwealth departmental officials they say that they provide money through the HEEP program but it is up to the individual institutions to implement programs for the visually impaired. As I understand your submission you are saying that that is grossly inadequate.

**Ms Evans**—That is correct.

**CHAIR**—You are saying that the institutions are not doing it and that as a consequence there basically needs to be a national program imposed on the institutions. Is that right?

**Ms Evans**—I am not sure that we would say it needs to be imposed.

**CHAIR**—How else are you going to get them to take it up?

**Ms Evans**—Certainly in my view there is a situation where there is inadequate funding to provide the same sort of support to students with a vision impairment or a print disability compared with a sighted student. For example, in the National Information and Library Service our materials production unit has a budget of about \$2 million. The funding that would be available to us to support that, which comes from the Department of Family and Community Services, is just under \$600,000. The balance of the funding to support the department that produces the alternative materials comes from bequests and donations—basically from charity. Our situation is probably similar to other not-for-profit organisations around the country that also provide this material. In terms of the adaptive technologies and those other matters, that is outside my organisation and I do not feel that it is appropriate for me to comment on those. I do not have adequate information.

**CHAIR**—I think I understand your point. From the individual student's point of view this is all very nice but it does not actually help them get through their course. If the facilities are not available, what responsibility does the Commonwealth have to make sure that they are?

**Ms Evans**—The Commonwealth, as I understand it, funds universities to provide support to students with disabilities. The universities are able to apply that money as they see fit and certainly there are staff employed to assist students with disabilities. Many universities now produce their own alternative format materials. But I believe, because I have done it on a university by university basis, that the not-for-profit agencies that are producing alternative format materials are doing so independently of each other. There is a waste of resource because often material may be produced more than once because, if it has not been placed on the national bibliographic database, there is no way of determining whether or not that material has been produced elsewhere by another university or another not-for-profit organisation. It might mean that we have to produce something in braille that has already been produced in braille elsewhere and a master is held but we are just not aware of it. So it is a duplication of that cost.

**CHAIR**—The problem that has been put to me, anyway, is that universities are not providing materials in braille. It is not a question of duplication; it is a much more profound problem than that. In fact, braille services have been wound back because, it is said, they are so expensive.

**Ms Evans**—Within universities, that might well be true. Our experience—and Tony might support me on this—is that the more complex braille material is what we are tending to do now on behalf of the universities. Subjects such as maths, chemistry, physics and music require a special braille code that cannot be produced through software so it takes a particular skill with that code to produce that kind of material. Often those skills are not available to transcribers based in universities, and it is that kind of material that we would do here at NILS.

**CHAIR**—It seems to me that what are you suggesting is that the HEEP money may well be better spent through your services than through the current diffusion. Most universities respond to the disabilities legislation by employing a disabilities liaison officer. That does not help people to read.

**Ms Evans**—Certainly, if we were better funded, we would be in a better position to produce more materials. I think that all the not-for-profit alternative format organisations would welcome a situation where they could work more closely together, particularly in terms of having a national database or ensuring that materials were placed on the national database so that we would not have to reproduce something that was already provided in an alternative format.

**CHAIR**—I am at a loss to actually get to the nub of what you are saying. You are basically saying that you want things to remain the same but that you want more money; is that the thrust of it?

**Ms Evans**—No. I would like to improve the situation.

**CHAIR**—I am suggesting that you need to be clearer with us.

**Ms Evans**—To improve the situation, I believe that we need to have a national framework that will ensure that the work that is done by universities, by not-for-profit organisations or by another organisation that may be set up specifically to do the job is approached in a coordinated way. There is an ad hoc approach at the moment, based on universities doing their own particular thing and on not-for-profit organisations doing their own particular thing. There is a diversity of equipment that is used to produce the material; there is a diversity of equipment that is used to read the material once it is produced.

It seems to me that there are opportunities for economies by taking a national approach to that and by trying to develop some national standards within which all the producers, if there are many, can operate, with an outcome that is acceptable as far as the students are concerned. For example, my understanding is that in New Zealand the Royal New Zealand Foundation for the Blind, which produces similar sorts of materials, is contracted by the education department to do that work. I would imagine that, in those circumstances, the education department has some very clear guidelines about how it would like its money spent.

**Senator ALLISON**—Could I ask you about the attachment to your submission, which is the bill that has been put forward in the United States, the Instructional Materials Accessibility Act 2001. What is the status of this legislation now?



**Ms Evans**—I understand that it is awaiting a Senate committee hearing. It has bipartisan support and it has been introduced to both houses, but I do not believe that it has actually gone through the process yet.

**Senator ALLISON**—But you expect it to do so?

**Ms Evans**—I would imagine that it will do, yes.

**Senator ALLISON**—Are you suggesting to this committee that we need federal legislation which is similar to this, or would you see some necessity to change it?

**Ms Evans**—I believe that this would provide a useful model for the Commonwealth government to have a look at, for a number of reasons. Firstly, it does quite clearly state that the outcome is that students with a print disability have the materials at the same time as a sighted student, which is obviously a critical factor for a student. It requires publishers to provide a standard electronic format of material, both the initial first-printing version and subsequent changes to the textbook. This would be beneficial for producers because in some instances we are not able to get an electronic copy from a publisher, which means that we might have to scan the material or word process the material initially before we can translate it to e-text or braille. In some instances, if we are able to get an electronic file, it is in software that we are unable to use. So, having a standard, particularly one based on the new NISO standards, would be helpful for us from a production point of view and therefore would assist with both timing and cost.

It also promotes a national database of these materials which producers could draw on to transcribe material. That again has some benefits. So I think there are elements of the legislation that would be highly desirable from a producer's point of view and also from the perspective of being able to provide a more timely service to students. Tony, do you want to add anything to that?

**Mr Iezzi**—Whenever we get a request to produce a title in braille, for example, the first thing we do is try to approach publishers to get the title in soft copy. It is not always the case that the soft copy we get is, as Jane says, able to be opened and the data stripped in the way that we need, so we have to employ different sorts of programs and different skills. Sometimes we get the soft copy and are going through the brailling process and we find that it is not exactly the same version that every other student in the classroom is reading. So issues about standards, about what is registered in the database—and Jane's comment about updates or changes to the text—become more relevant in the context that what we need to produce is the same book that every other student in the classroom is using.

**Senator ALLISON**—Is that just an error or is there something deliberate going on with publishers to deny you access?

**Mr Iezzi**—I would not conclude that there is anything deliberate. I do not think we really know. But we are finding that some publishers are more happy than not to come to the party and give us a copy. With other publishers it is a bit harder; they want to know who we are, why, what it is about. Others still want us to pay for a copy of that e-copy. So if the students have already bought the hard copy, and they come to us and say, 'We want this in braille,' some publishers would still want a fee for giving us the soft-copy version of the same book.

**Senator ALLISON**—So you are talking about a copyright fee?

**Mr Iezzi**—Yes. The claim is that the student has already paid for it.

**Senator ALLISON**—Are these fees being charged reasonable?

**Mr Iezzi**—In some situations we might have to look at charging back to the university, including the cost of actually producing that work. If one adopted that position—that we have to pay for every soft copy—that increases the cost for the student. They have already gone and paid for the hard-copy book; why should they pay again?

**Senator ALLISON**—If this is adopted in the United States, would you expect there to be a worldwide flow-on effect? Presumably, publishers we have here will comply in the states and therefore it will make the job easier in Australia, as it were—or do you not expect that?

**Ms Evans**—I am not sure that would necessarily be the case, because the copyright laws in the United States prohibit access to any of their materials other than by a United States citizen. Tony could perhaps explain more about this. My understanding is that we might be able to source a United States book but we cannot necessarily obtain it, because of their particular copyright legislation.

**Mr Iezzi**—There is an example, Bookshare—bookshare.org. It is a site where braille text is available—also the full, standard text of the book—but a braille file version as well that you can download and send to the embosser to come up with a braille item. But that is a service that is only available to US citizens and organisations.

**Senator ALLISON**—With the translating and embossing process, can you do multiple copies fairly easily, or is it laborious and does it need to be done one at a time?

**Mr Iezzi**—The most time is taken in doing the work the first time. You save most of it as a computer file anyway. Follow-up work to run off copies is fairly straightforward. However, when the works involve diagrams, raised line drawings or a whole lot of different things that you cannot just save in a computer file, some of those elements have to be done manually. I have an example of a maths book here that has the text for most of the book, plus it has these pieces of special paper. Some of these are used with a special machine. Two different processes are used to render this particular page—and that is two processes by hand.

**Senator ALLISON**—Just for the benefit of *Hansard*, could you describe the size of the braille book you have there and tell us about its relationship to the textbook?

**Mr Iezzi**—I have brought this as an example. I do not have the hard copy but I can read from the cover: *Statistics for the Behavioural Sciences: a First Course for Students of Psychology and Education*. This particular volume represents chapter 2 in the book. It is 127 braille pages, plus all the tactile diagrams, and it represents 33 pages of the book. The book might end up being 20-30 volumes—this is one volume. This is a standard maths book that is used in HSC or secondary school. It has nearly 600 pages. By the time you have rendered all the answers at the back of the book, which are all diagrams and other bits and pieces, it is an indication of the skill that is required because no machine can do that. A person has to sit there, look at it, translate it

in their minds, and then key it into a computer, or work it out in some way to make a diagram. That is really why it takes so long to do.

**Senator ALLISON**—Are you ever involved in translating text or in some way changing publications to make them accessible to students with learning disabilities?

**Ms Evans**—No, we do not get involved in that, Senator.

**Senator ALLISON**—Do you know of organisations that do?

**Ms Evans**—I am not familiar with any. We restrict our work to print disability, which is blind or vision impaired and people with issues such as dyslexia, or arthritis where they cannot manipulate a print book.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Do you have any indication of the proportion of students that have a print disability that do not go on to university or start and stop because they are not getting sufficient assistance with the correct materials?

**Ms Evans**—I do not have that information. At the moment we are looking after about 100 students at the tertiary level and about 150 at the secondary and primary levels. I do not have figures as to how many of those at the secondary level would not go on to tertiary level and I do not have figures of those that drop out. We have only anecdotal information and we know that some students do not continue their studies.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Has anyone monitored that?

**Ms Evans**—Not as far as I am aware, Senator, no.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Ms Evans, you mentioned that when students at university try to use some of the systems that the university is giving them to assist with their disability they find them useless because they have not been trained to use them. Can you just explain that a little bit further?

**Ms Evans**—There are various adaptive technologies that students with a print disability can access. For example, there are screen readers such as a product called JAWS which will use synthesised voice to read out the text on screen, and another product called ‘zoom text’ which will enlarge the text on screen. There are refreshable braille and braille notes and these sorts of devices. But we are finding quite often that students arrive in the university environment where that adaptive technology is available but they have not been trained in the use of it. This has become quite an issue and certainly one that was raised again at the HREOC forum I mentioned earlier.

There are some organisations that do provide that training. For example, the RVIB has a program called Kickstart, which is designed specifically to assist a student moving from the secondary environment into the tertiary environment, and it includes training on adaptive technologies. But I think the demand there for that program is greater than they are ever able to respond to so not everyone has the opportunity to go through that training. It would seem that not all students have the opportunity to receive that training in the secondary environment either.

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**Senator TIERNEY**—With some of those technologies they are using at the tertiary level are we talking about a lot of training? Would it take a lot of time to train them how to use those technologies?

**Ms Evans**—I believe the Kickstart program that I mentioned takes about two weeks, so it certainly does not take a great deal of time. That particular program assumes that there is some facility with the basic Word software and a basic understanding of how to use the Internet and that sort of thing. It would probably take longer if you were starting without those basic skills.

**Senator TIERNEY**—So the universities have budgeted to provide the hardware but they have not budgeted anything to help students use the technology. Would that be a reasonable summary?

**Ms Evans**—There may be budget but perhaps they do not choose to apply it in that way.

**Senator TIERNEY**—So they have students there who need the material. The material is there but the students cannot use it.

**Ms Evans**—They can if we produce it in hard copy format such as the braille volume that Tony showed you. But, from my point of view, obviously we could provide a more timely and less costly method if we were able to send that electronically as a braille file that a student could access themselves through adaptive technology or as an e-text document which could be read by a screen reader.

**Senator TIERNEY**—So you are saying that this is a common problem right across the university system?

**Ms Evans**—Anecdotally that seems to be the case.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Has anyone put it to the universities that they should do something about this? If so, what has their response been?

**Ms Evans**—When it was raised at the HREOC forum, where I think something like 34 of the 39 universities were present, there was considerable acclamation for the idea that there should be some kind of bridging program that would assist in this area, and one of the recommendations that came out of the HREOC forum was to look at that. Certainly there would be considerable benefit, I believe, if such a program were funded or if the programs currently available through organisations like RVIB—and I imagine other blindness agencies have similar programs—could be expanded so that they could handle more students. I think that would be a very useful initiative.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Have you raised this with the Australian Vice Chancellors Committee?

**Ms Evans**—The Australian vice chancellors were represented at the HREOC forum and my understanding is that the AVCC and HREOC are jointly sponsoring a working party to consider all the recommendations that came out of that forum. One would hope it would be addressed there.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Thank you. The University of Western Sydney has advocated the establishment of a national transcription service. Is that a workable concept? What is your view on what they are suggesting?

**Ms Evans**—I think it would be desirable. The National Information and Library Service is involved in this because it was something that kind of grew up like Topsy, I suppose, in our organisation. But we do not necessarily say that we have to be the only organisation involved or that we should be involved at all. The outcome that we are looking for is a better service as far as students with print disabilities are concerned. If that could be achieved by establishing a national organisation that was able to operate with those sorts of standards that I was talking about earlier and provide a contracted service to the universities and if we could reduce the number of formats that were being produced and could look at ways of achieving economies of scale in that national organisation, that would be a very laudable outcome.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Are there any universities that you can point to as best practice in this field?

**Ms Evans**—I believe the University of Melbourne would be quite good.

**Mr Iezzi**—Yes. They are one organisation that does make an effort. They are raising issues through their staff consultative committees and highlighting the issues through all levels of the organisation. On occasion we have actually employed a braillist who has worked for them. Some organisations have their own production facilities, albeit fairly small and for the simplified materials. They are one of the more organised, I guess, in that sense.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Do they train students how to use the equipment at the University of Melbourne ?

**Mr Iezzi**—I do not know. I do not think that they have too many programs in that regard but I am not really sure.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much for coming today.

[2.06 p.m.]

**BIESKE, Mrs Noeleen Mary, President, Australian Association of Teachers of the Deaf (Victoria)**

**DANN, Ms Marilyn, Membership Secretary, Australian Association of Teachers of the Deaf (Victoria)**

**CHAIR**—I welcome representatives from the Australian Association of Teachers of the Deaf. The committee has before it submission No. 110. Are there any changes or corrections that you would like to make?

**Mrs Bieske**—No.

**CHAIR**—The committee prefers that all evidence be given in public, although the committee would also consider any request for all or part of the 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.

**Mrs Bieske**—Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee. We are here representing more than 100 teachers of the deaf throughout Victoria. We have teachers of the deaf who are working at all levels of education—early intervention, kindergarten, primary school, secondary school and in tertiary settings—and in government and non-government settings. Around Victoria there are approximately 2,000 deaf and hearing-impaired children under the age of 21.

The Victorian government provision for deaf and hearing impaired children in the state comprises mainstream schooling—local neighbourhood schools where deaf and hearing impaired are supported by itinerant teachers of the deaf—which accounts for the vast majority of deaf and hearing-impaired children in the state; special schools for deaf and hearing impaired children; and units within mainstream schools, which we call ‘facilities’ in Victoria, where teachers of the deaf work in collaboration with mainstream teachers to provide intensive support within regular settings, giving the students access to the regular curriculum. The non-government sector provides support via itinerant teachers of the deaf—and that has come out as a result of the Victorian government withdrawing services to all non-government schools at the end of 1994—and they also provide facility type units as well as stand-alone schools.

The concerns we want to raise today—and Marilyn and I will share the discussion on these—are about funding eligibility and, in particular, the lack of funding for students who have conductive hearing impairment. At any one time about one-third of the children in a regular classroom may have conductive hearing loss.

**Senator ALLISON**—Could you explain what ‘conductive hearing loss’ is?

**Mrs Bieske**—It is middle ear infection. It is not a permanent condition, but it can be recurring in a primary school-aged child’s life. We would like to address the accuracy with which the needs are assessed by the questionnaire which government students—or parents and

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schools—in Victoria have to fill out in order to access funding. We would like to address the access and adequacy of that funding and we would also like to address the lack of equity and the choice of programs—particularly in regional and rural areas but even in metropolitan Melbourne, including the provision for transport. There are currently five primary facilities in metropolitan Melbourne and five in country areas. There are four secondary facilities for hearing impaired and deaf students in Melbourne, while there is only one secondary facility in the country—and that is in Bendigo. In the independent system, there are three prep—or beginning school years—to year 12 facilities, but they are all within metropolitan Melbourne. The final thing we would like to address is the shortage of teachers of the deaf and the lack of initiatives to recruit more into the field. It is an Australia-wide problem; it is not only a Victorian problem. Marilyn will now address the funding issue.

**Ms Dann**—To set the funding issue in context, I would like to give a very brief outline of the sorts of difficulties faced by children who are born deaf or who acquire deafness in that prelingual period—anything up to about one year old—to show the complexity of their needs. Then I can address the shortages of funding.

In every 1,000 live births we are dealing with about two babies who are born with deafness. Of those babies that are born deaf, only about three per cent are born to deaf families. By far and away the greatest proportion—about 97 per cent—of children are born to families who have normal hearing. While those three per cent who are born to deaf families do acquire native sign language very readily, by the time they get to school they are going to have lots of challenges learning the English they need if they are to acquire mainstream literacy. About 97 per cent are born to hearing families, and those families may not even discover that their child is deaf until they are over one year old. In Australia at the moment the average age for the initial diagnosis of profound deafness is still only 14 months old. When you think for a moment of a normal hearing baby at 14 months, they have had 14 months of listening and are already acquiring their first spoken words as true symbols of cognitive development. Deaf babies in Australia are still not diagnosed till about 14 months. By the time their families come to terms with that—seek out the best information, make decisions about whether they are going to look at hearing aids, cochlear implants or whether they are going to look at sign language or spoken language development—it might be that the baby is nearer two before really good quality early intervention takes place. By the time a normally hearing child is two, they are speaking in sentences—they have amazingly receptive language.

So, by the time most of our children come to school, no matter what sort of early intervention they have had, typically they enter school as a five-year-old with language development which is at least two to three standard deviations below normal. The implications for their successful entry into education are enormous. You cannot read above your language level, so we have enormous literacy problems. We have problems not only with their ability to understand language, their receptive language, but also their ability to express themselves. We show our intelligence by our language. Many of our children—the vast majority—do have normal intelligence, but they cannot access that because they do not have the language.

A recent study conducted in Melbourne and Sydney by Dr Peter Blamey of the University of Melbourne has shown that at least 90 per cent of the deaf and hearing impaired children in his study have at least one standard deviation of language delay and more than half of them have at least two standard deviations. So, when it comes to funding, there are very many complex issues.

The Victorian education department has a program for students with disabilities which allows parents of hearing impaired and deaf children to access funding in a mainstream school, in a facility such as mine, which is a unit for deaf children within a regular school, or in a specialist setting. Basically, parents are asked to fill in a questionnaire and to tick the box which most suitably describes their child's level of communication, level of hearing or whatever. There are many different criteria in this program for students with disabilities. However, although the form is designed to be simple and accessible to parents, for hearing impaired and deaf children the simplicity of the form really fails time and time again to adequately acknowledge the complexity of the issues faced by young, prelingually deaf children. It has resulted in a situation in which deaf children are not adequately funded under this method. For many years people such as me have challenged the education department of Victoria on this issue, and we have been successful in keeping many of our children outside this funding and funding under a former model. We have been successful in getting more funds for our kids, but we are constantly challenged and have to re-enter negotiations year in, year out, to fight on behalf of our kids. The system, as it stands, certainly disadvantages those kids.

As Noeleen said, it certainly also precludes children born not with permanent hearing loss but with ongoing conductive middle ear problems, which are usually resolved in a young child's life by the time they are eight years of age. Physiologically, this basically means that young children often have glue ears—that is, a lot of mucus hardens in their middle ear—and in those very early years of schooling when they are learning to read they can be at a great disadvantage. While those problems are often alleviated by the time they are eight or nine years of age, these kids are at risk in relation to literacy development. Currently, the Victorian program does not cover those children for disabilities and impairments. That program covers the children that Noeleen and I are mostly working with but, as I said, we feel that the funding for our kids under this particular funding model is often inadequate. Noeleen will pick up on funding in the private schools system.

**Mrs Bieske**—I work in the non-government sector. I run a school at three separate sites for hearing impaired children from prep to year 12. I have 47 students enrolled in my school and 20 of these have cochlear implants. However, as you are probably well aware, we are funded under the Commonwealth's States Grants Act 2000. We were very grateful for the increase that we received under that act, but it still means that by the time we get to 2004 we will still be receiving only 70 per cent of the funding that is given to a regular school child in the country. We believe that the average recurrent cost index should be based upon the average total cost of educating a student with a disability in a government special school. The maximum I am receiving at the moment is \$4,700 for a secondary age student and \$3,297 for a primary age student, and the categories that are being given in the state system are a lot higher than that.

While we struggle to pay our teachers' salaries, we also have the on-costs of all those employees. The funding does not take into consideration long service leave, leave loading, superannuation—all those sorts of things. Since 1990, the number of disabled students in non-government schools in Victoria has trebled, and the complexity of their disability has increased. Parents choose to send their disabled child to a non-government school but they are significantly disadvantaged because the schools struggle with limited resources to provide what is required to meet the needs of that student. One thing that we would really like to be looked at is the way in which the non-government or independent system for special schools is funded.



We have concerns about our rural and remote areas that need to be addressed. There is a disparity of services across Victoria. As I mentioned, in the whole state of Victoria there is one secondary facility and three primary based facilities outside Melbourne. However, most of the deaf and hearing impaired students out of Melbourne are unable to access these integrated deaf facilities. There are serious concerns about the capacity of the local schools where the parents choose to send their child to provide for the needs of these students. Once you leave the metropolitan area there is a shortage of appropriately qualified personnel, and the difficulty of attracting personnel to work in those areas has not been sufficiently addressed. Some of these students use Auslan, and to get qualified, experienced and appropriate people to work with these students in the country areas is another hurdle that we are facing in deaf education.

The department of education in Victoria has failed to maintain the visiting teacher service to the country areas, and that has impacted negatively on the educational provision in the country areas. Some parents or families choose to send their child to a specialist school because their local school is not appropriate, which means their child leaving home to go to a metropolitan area. Here we have difficulty in accommodation. The department of education in Victoria is reluctant to consider accommodation as an education imperative, and there have been several cases of applications for accommodation support being turned down in this state. Not all primary aged students can cope in a regular primary school with very limited support in the country, and certainly once they are secondary age students they need more support than they can get in their local area.

In regard to teacher training, I alluded to the difficulty of attracting qualified people into certain areas. We believe as an association that there is not enough funding being given to universities to provide postgraduate courses. Graduate teachers are given no incentive to pursue specialist training. After you have done your four-year training, are you going to go on and do another year if that means more HECS fees and more 'no income'? Precedents for specialist training have been set in other states. New South Wales is actually providing teachers with the opportunity to do specialist training, and they are being paid a considerable salary to do that. In Victoria, nothing like that is happening. Within the next five to 10 years there will be a critical shortage of teachers. We are experiencing it now, but there will be an extreme shortage of teachers of the deaf throughout the country because of the lack of training that is occurring.

We would like to see some means of providing scholarships, no HECS fees and some incentives to encourage people to take up specialist training. We note that the Victorian government, in attachment 14 to their submission, have announced that specialist schools have been asked to identify vacancies for scholarship holders in 2003. As representatives of the Principals Committee in Victoria, which is a very large group of specialist teachers working in hearing impaired and deaf facilities, we have not even been notified that specialist schools have been asked to put forward names. So it is a major concern that we will be facing a shortage of teachers of the deaf in the future.

**Ms Dann**—I want to pick up now on our concerns about early intervention.

**CHAIR**—We normally have an opportunity to ask a few questions. You may find that it is appropriate to build your material into your answers.

**Ms Dann**—Yes, certainly.

**CHAIR**—I will begin by asking you what your position is in regard to the question of integration. We have had a number of submissions that have said that the trend toward integration over the last 10 to 15 years—in fact probably a bit longer, but particularly since the disabilities act was passed in 1992—has led to a deterioration in the services provided to deaf students or students who have any other disabilities. What do you say to that?

**Mrs Bieske**—For students who are in their regular local primary schools the visiting teacher service in this state has been depleted considerably, but with regard to the facility arrangement it has worked extremely well. With the support of the latest technology for hearing impairment, and also with considerable support from teachers of the deaf in those settings, we are getting some fantastic results with our students accessing regular curricula in mainstream classes.

**Ms Dann**—I support Noeleen there. In, I think, 1990 there was a state-wide Victorian inquiry into the field of education for the deaf and hearing impaired. At that time parents could choose regular mainstream schools with an itinerant support service of teachers of the deaf or a specialist segregated school. One of the outcomes of that review was to recognise the need for a halfway provision where units—in Victoria they are called facilities—would be established in a number of mainstream schools in which you would have full-time teachers of the deaf supporting groups of children who would come in from a catchment area. That has proven to be extremely successful.

We talk about an inclusive model but it is not truly inclusive unless the kids are properly supported by well-qualified teachers, unless there is a really good assessment of their needs and programs written specifically for their needs—and that has to be maintained. We have many children in our program whose language is completely within normal limits but we know that those kids have only got to that stage because of the quality of support. We want to ensure that when they leave primary school and go on to a secondary school that that sort of quality support can continue.

**CHAIR**—You say that the record is somewhat mixed.

**Ms Dann**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—You are saying that it works best when the facilities are made available. That is a pretty commonsense approach to take; I do not know any area of education where that does not apply. The trouble is that when governments start to cut back on programs it is usually the weakest in our community who suffer first.

**Mrs Bieske**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—If you take, for instance, the Kennett government decision to disband the visiting teacher service and the removal of special needs teachers from the funding formulas when all those schools were closed—there were quite massive changes under the Kennett regime—or the broadbanding by the Commonwealth government when it started to cut back in these areas, it is the people who you are trying to service who appear to be hit hardest. Another problem, surely, is that when governments say they are making funding available through some other means—such as the non-government school system with the visiting teacher service—the money gets absorbed in administration costs or some other device and never actually gets to the student or the school. What do you say to that proposition?

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**Mrs Bieske**—We provide, from my school to the non-government sector, a visiting teacher service. We work with the Association of Independent Schools of Victoria to provide that. Independent schools in Victoria put in submissions to get funding to provide visiting teacher support. However, the funding began in 1995 and the students were allocated \$40 an hour per visit; this year they have received \$22. The numbers have increased but the funding has not increased—and the demand is there—so we are unable to provide a regular service to these kids. Some of those schools have picked up the costs and we continue to provide a service. Other schools have said, ‘You must work within the budget that we have.’

**CHAIR**—In that context, is it any surprise that there seems to be an increase in enrolments in the specialist schools? The evidence we are getting is that the demand for participation in those schools is now increasing quite dramatically.

**Mrs Bieske**—Are you talking about the segregated settings?

**CHAIR**—Yes; what we used to call the special schools in Victoria. There are 80 of them. The evidence we have is that the number of people trying to get into them is actually increasing. These people are walking away from the integration model.

**Mrs Bieske**—I would not say that would be true for deaf and hearing impaired students. In terms of applications to get into facilities like Marilyn’s—and my school operates in a similar way except it is a preparatory to year 12 school—we do have many applicants wanting to come in, particularly in my case, at a secondary level where there is more support than a once-a-week visit. I would think, because of the technology that has also happened within our field, these students now want to be more a part of the regular school placement.

**Ms Dann**—I think what has happened is that parents used to have a great deal of confidence in having their hearing impaired child in their regular local government primary or secondary school, supported by an itinerant visiting teacher service. Those families no longer have confidence in that model and so want their children to come into units such as the facilities in which I work. There has definitely been a movement from local schools with an itinerant support, with people queuing up to get into other facilities, so I think that is accurate.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much.

**Mrs Bieske**—But it is also not putting them into a segregated setting; they really are going into a regular school but with a high level of support.

**CHAIR**—But you are saying that the integration model that we have come to understand is not necessarily producing—

**Mrs Bieske**—No, it is not.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Could you provide us with a snapshot of the balance of where children who have a deafness disability are—whether they are in specialist schools or special units within comprehensive schools or are integrated into a regular classroom with itinerant teacher support? What is the balance?

**Ms Dann**—In Victoria we know that there are just over 2,000 deaf and hearing impaired students under 21 years. By far and away the vast majority of those are out in their local schools. Depending on where they are, they are either supported well in some cases by a visiting teacher service—particularly in metropolitan areas—and well in some regional and rural areas where that service exists, or supported by no-one in other areas where there are no visiting teachers, and that might be because there are no teachers of the deaf who are living and working in those parts of Victoria. We have several hundred students in facilities in special units and we have far fewer students in segregated schools. After the 1990 review into deaf education there were only two segregated schools for deaf children remaining in Victoria, and one of those has now become a facility within a mainstream school.

**Senator TIERNEY**—So there is now only one special school?

**Ms Dann**—Which is the Victorian College for the Deaf in Melbourne, yes.

**Senator TIERNEY**—How many students does it have?

**Ms Dann**—I think about 80.

**Mrs Bieske**—I think its numbers are somewhere between 60 and 80.

**Senator TIERNEY**—You mentioned that some parents are moving away from integrated, regular classes because of lack of confidence in the model—and this is with visiting teacher support. Why is that happening?

**Ms Dann**—I think that there have been a lot of challenges to visiting teachers. Time and time again in Victoria we have seen visiting teachers who have had to go for their jobs again and again, year in, year out. Many teachers do not want to work like that; they want to get into a school where they have tenure. We have had changes to the system many times. Many visiting teachers are working with case loads of 60-odd children in an area, and so the level of support that they can give is adequate for some—those who just need a consultancy—but very inadequate for many who need a much more intensified level of support.

Parents of little children want the absolute best for their child and, if their child is sufficiently deaf to be eligible for a facility, many parents will move. I have had parents move from country areas to us in Glen Waverly. Many of my families have moved considerable distances. I have another family that every day drives 55 kilometres one way—so that is 110 kilometres every day—to access a quality service for their very deaf little child.

**Senator TIERNEY**—In that case, what sort of service is it? What sort of school are they going to?

**Ms Dann**—Mine is a mainstream school, which has as an integral part a facility where we have eight full-time teachers of the deaf. Those students come in, we give them each up to an hour a day of highly intensive support, either individually or in small groups, to develop their language, their understanding, their ability to express themselves and their ability to use whatever devices they use—whether it be a cochlear implant, hearing aids or a radiofrequency unit.

**Senator TIERNEY**—So how much time is a child who is in a school with a visiting teacher going to get a week?

**Ms Dann**—It might be one visit a week; it might be one visit a month.

**Senator TIERNEY**—One visit a month!

**Ms Dann**—It can be one visit a term.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Just say I am that itinerant core teacher. There is a child with a disability of deafness and I see them once a month. What can I do usefully in one visit a month?

**Ms Dann**—You really cannot do much one-on-one, but your role would be one of providing professional development to the mainstream staff. You would be trying to raise awareness—

**Senator TIERNEY**—So it is really more an in-service role to staff than actually assisting the student.

**Mrs Bieske**—You would be developing strategies with the staff of how to cope with the needs of these students in their already busy classrooms.

**Senator TIERNEY**—So it is an in-service type role, really?

**Mrs Bieske**—Yes.

**Senator TIERNEY**—What about if we move out of Melbourne? What sort of service could a child who has a hearing impairment get in rural Victoria?

**Mrs Bieske**—There is a facility down at Traralgon, there is a facility in Geelong—a primary one similar to what Marilyn has described, and run in a similar way to the way she runs her school—and there is another one being developed in Ballarat at the moment.

**Ms Dann**—And there is Bendigo.

**Mrs Bieske**—And there is one in Bendigo and Shepparton. If you live anywhere else in Victoria—if you live way down in Warrnambool or in Mildura—there are only visiting teachers. Those areas have had great difficulty in attracting qualified teachers for the deaf, because the work load is horrendous. People working from Horsham have a work load of something like 80 students to visit, plus the distance—the Wimmera, the Mallee and all of that. It is just horrendous.

**Senator TIERNEY**—So what is the range that a teacher who is based in Horsham, for example, has to cover? How far would they have to drive? What would the maximum—the furthest school from their base—be?

**Mrs Bieske**—I could not give you accurate figures on that, but I know for some it was in excess of 100 kilometres.

**Senator TIERNEY**—So it would be true to say that they would spend most of their—

**Mrs Bieske**—Time on the road.

**Senator TIERNEY**—working time in the car?

**Ms Dann**—It can be.

**Mrs Bieske**—And away from home, too, because it is not efficient to travel there and back, so they might have to stay away.

**Senator TIERNEY**—When a child has a hearing impairment, often these things are identifiable very early in the child's life. Could you describe what happens in Victoria in terms of early identification and intervention strategies before a child gets to school?

**Ms Dann**—Yes, I would be very pleased to. I am not sure whether you are aware of the very exciting developments around the world in neonatal hearing screening. We now have the technology to screen every baby's hearing before they leave hospital. It is a very easy, simple test. In some of the states in America where it has been introduced and in some European countries we are finding amazingly exciting developments of children screened for hearing before they leave hospital, diagnosed in the first couple of months of life and then parents making decisions regarding communication method, cochlear implant or hearing aids. All the research is showing that, if children are diagnosed by the time they are six months old and receive appropriate early intervention, those children can enter school with language which is within the normal range—it might be at the lower end of normal, but it is within the normal range.

In our present situation in Victoria, children's hearing loss is not usually diagnosed until about 14 months of age, so there is an enormous gap. In Victoria, if your baby is known to be at risk for hearing loss—for instance, if there is deafness in the family or if you have been exposed to viruses known to cause deafness during pregnancy—your baby can be tested in the first couple of days, but that is not picking up many of our children, because most children who are born deaf are not born deaf due to known factors.

We are really hoping that the neonatal hearing screening will become practice throughout Australia. Western Australia has introduced some pilot studies, New South Wales has introduced some pilot neonatal hearing screening and Victoria is about to, so we are very excited by that. However, what do you do when you have these babies diagnosed? It is absolutely essential that absolute best practice early intervention facilities are then available to you. In Melbourne, if you live in the eastern suburbs, you have excellent early intervention and you have a choice: if you choose for your child to learn signing, you have excellent choice; if you choose for your child to develop spoken language, you have excellent choice. Move away from the eastern suburbs of Melbourne and those choices are not there—you might have one or you might have another. Move into regional and rural areas of Victoria and the access is much more limited. Maybe you have access to an itinerant service and there is some videoconferencing available with some early intervention agencies, but it is certainly true that, as you move outside of Melbourne, your choices for quality early intervention rapidly go down.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Regarding your reference to the eastern suburbs, is that where the practitioners choose to live? Is that the thing that is driving it?

**Ms Dann**—That is where we can attract them, yes.

**Mrs Bieske**—But it is also where most of the facilities and schools for the deaf are. There is very little on the western side.

**CHAIR**—Is it where all the marginal seats are as well?

**Mrs Bieske**—No, they are quite safe some of those seats, which is a bit unfortunate. The western and the north-western areas of Melbourne are not very well-serviced.

**Ms Dann**—One problem in getting teachers of the deaf is getting teachers to do the postgraduate qualification. You have young grads coming out after four years and, with so many jobs now available in mainstream schools where they can get about \$40,000 a year, the idea of doing a fifth year as a postgraduate qualification—at the end of which you are not going to get any more money and will have paid an extra year of HECS—is not attractive; there are just no incentives. Additionally, advertised teacher-of-the-deaf jobs are usually for just 12 months. Warrnambool has not been able to get someone to go down there, but they have been only offering a 12-month tenure. Are you really seriously going to attract people down there by just offering a job for 12 months? We have got to look at incentives for getting specialist trained teachers of the deaf into areas of need, particularly in rural and regional areas, and we have got to be creative in finding ways to encourage them to do the training and then to take up jobs.

The average age of teachers of the deaf is approaching 50 years of age in Victoria. Noeleen and I are old campaigners and we are just not getting the young people coming in to work alongside us. We are very concerned about the future.

**Senator ALLISON**—I would like to pursue the situation for the vast majority of the 2,000 Victorian children in mainstream schools who receive one hour—possibly that is all—and who may be profoundly deaf. Is it reasonable to say that most of them would be getting one hour a day, and would most of them be profoundly deaf?

**Ms Dann**—If they are profoundly deaf, Senator, they would be eligible for funding through the Program for Disabilities and Impairments.

**Senator ALLISON**—What does that mean to them as they—

**Ms Dann**—It might mean that they have a teacher aide working with them.

**Senator ALLISON**—A teacher aide who would be able to sign?

**Ms Dann**—Possibly, hopefully, but not absolutely. But you would hope that the teacher aide would then work very closely with the itinerant teacher of the deaf coming in to develop their skills.

**Senator ALLISON**—So a profoundly deaf child would have level 6 funding, the \$30,000 a year? No?

**Ms Dann**—No.

**Senator ALLISON**—What would they receive?

**Ms Dann**—Students who are deaf or hearing impaired tend to get levels 1, 2 or 3 funding, certainly not the higher funding.

**Senator ALLISON**—So \$3,000 to \$5,000—

**Ms Dann**—Up to about \$14,000. I think level 3 is about \$14,000 per annum. Maybe that would buy some teacher aide time and maybe some speech pathology time. We have got a situation where a profoundly deaf boy from Gippsland, serviced by an itinerant teacher and with a teacher aide for some of the time, comes up to my program once a term. We assess him and we help his teacher aide and his visiting teacher too. Sometimes when you are working in isolation it is very hard to really know where to go with children who have such huge delays in their language. We introduced that measure because the mum of this particular child rang us in desperation not really knowing what to do. The teacher aide is very keen to help but does not have qualifications.

**Senator ALLISON**—Since you have raised the issue of this child, \$14,000 does not buy a full-time aide—

**Ms Dann**—No.

**Senator ALLISON**—especially if you take out money for other services too. So the child presumably has part of the day—maybe three hours a day—of an aide, one hour a day or a week of a visiting teacher—

**Ms Dann**—Maybe one hour a fortnight or a week.

**Senator ALLISON**—What does that child do in the other three hours of every day?

**Ms Dann**—His language delay is getting greater. That is what is happening with his—

**Senator ALLISON**—So he may sit in the classroom and not take part in the activities that other children are engaging in. Is that a fair way to state it?

**Mrs Bieske**—It is a fair assessment of the situation. It puts an extra burden then on the regular classroom teacher too. The classroom teacher has this child who could become a behaviour problem because he is disenchanted and his self-esteem and confidence disappear. It can have a wide impact.

**Senator ALLISON**—Thank you. Let me go to the question of teachers. You say there is a critical shortage of teachers. Could we put some numbers on that? You have a hundred teachers



of the deaf in your association. Does that represent pretty much everybody in Victoria or are there others who are not members?

**Mrs Bieske**—No, there are others who are not members. I do not have an accurate figure on that. We would love to have them all as members, and we have grown from 70 to 108 membership. We are a very active organisation. We provide regular PD—

**Senator ALLISON**—I am more interested in the shortages. Are you able to predict, say, over the next four or five years what the shortages will look like in actual numbers?

**Ms Dann**—Yes. We have been collating figures and we believe that there will be a critical shortage. I do not have the figures with me. Certainly we have been unable to attract a teacher of the deaf into an ongoing vacancy at my school this year. A few years ago you advertised for teachers of the deaf and you would have four or five applicants. These days you are very lucky to get one applicant, and that is true of the entire field.

**Senator ALLISON**—If you have done some predictions on figures for shortages I am sure the committee would—

**Ms Dann**—We can send those through.

**Senator ALLISON**—I think it is fair to say too that it makes no sense for there to be no incentives for people to do this work. Are the shortages going to arise from visiting teachers—you suggested that those visiting teachers are often on short-term contracts, have to be away for hours on end and spend a lot of time travelling—or are they going to be in the special schools or in the schools like yours?

**Ms Dann**—I think all sectors, but particularly in rural and regional areas. For about three years now the Warrnambool area has been unable to attract a teacher of the deaf. There have been many ads placed now. Recently the VSDC, the Victorian Services for Deaf Children, and the education department have entered into a collaborative arrangement where the VSDC will provide a model and the education department is going to look at funding that model. So that is a very good example of a collaborative, imaginative response to the area of great need down there.

**Senator ALLISON**—I have one last question on teacher aides. We know that there are some courses available for them but not all are required to have any qualifications at all. Should there be, or is there, a course for teacher aides for the deaf? It seems unlikely that someone with training in autism and physical disability would be able to cope with a deaf child as readily.

**Ms Dann**—Within the teacher aide courses we are often asked to give maybe three or four hours of lectures and, while that is good and we do not want to discourage that, it certainly does not in any way equate to having a fully trained teacher of the deaf working with a child with hearing loss.

**Senator ALLISON**—So is it a waste of time to have teacher aides for these children? Should they have fully trained teachers, or should teacher aides be specialising in deaf—

**Mrs Bieske**—In some situations I do not think there is any choice. There is not a teacher of the deaf available.

**Senator ALLISON**—We know there is not now, but if you were to change the system would you like to see a specific training course?

**Ms Dann**—Absolutely. We do not employ teacher aides in my program—not by choice anyway. We employ fully qualified teachers of the deaf. Most of our children have normal intelligence. With intensive one-on-one or with small group support throughout the week—maybe one hour a day—many of our kids can access normal programs. We really have had some fantastic success stories and we do not believe that they need a teacher aide sitting beside them. These kids need to develop their own pragmatic skills of alerting the teacher when they have not heard so that they can cooperatively—

**Senator ALLISON**—So the teacher aide is more likely to be a child minder and keep them out of trouble rather than do anything constructive.

**Ms Dann**—In some instances, for children who are not in facilities and who are funded by the Program for Disabilities and Impairments, that school together with the parents will work out what to do, whether to have a teacher aide or employ a speech pathologist—just to have a look at how that funding can best be spent really. But certainly in my experience anyway a teacher aide is by far a lesser option.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much indeed.

[3.05 p.m.]

**KING, Ms Debbie, General Manager, External and Intergovernmental Relations, Victorian Department of Education and Training**

**LIVI, Mr John, Principal Legal Officer and Manager, Legal Services Branch, Victorian Department of Education and Training**

**NORLING, Ms Jeanne Frances, Manager, Student Disabilities, Office of School Education, Victorian Department of Education and Training**

**SCULLY, Ms Madeleine Louise, Manager, Participation Initiatives, Program Development Branch, Vocational Education and Training Division, Victorian Department of Education and Training**

**TAIT, Ms Susan Jane, General Manager, Students and Communities, Victorian Department of Education and Training**

**CHAIR**—I welcome witnesses from the Victorian Department of Education and Training. The committee has before it your submission, No. 212. Are there any changes or corrections that you would like to make?

**Ms Tait**—No.

**CHAIR**—The committee prefers all evidence to be given in public, although the committee would consider any request for all or part of your evidence to be given in camera. Such evidence may subsequently be made public by order of the Senate. I now invite you to make a brief opening statement.

**Ms Tait**—I will read a brief statement to the committee. I would like to thank the committee for this opportunity to outline the services provided to students with disabilities in Victoria. Our submission is a genuine attempt to provide the committee with comprehensive information on the full range of these services across all sectors, ranging from early childhood and school education through to further education and training. As indicated in the submission, responsibility for the delivery of education services to students with disabilities is shared by the Department of Education and Training and the Department of Human Services. A variety of cooperative and integrated arrangements are in place to ensure that students with disabilities experience a continuity of high-quality assistance as they move from early childhood services into the school environment.

Victoria commits substantial funding to meet the specific needs of students with disabilities. In terms of government primary and secondary schooling, for example, all mainstream and special schools are funded through the school global budget. Under the school global budget arrangements, individual schools are given a large degree of flexibility in how they deploy funds to best meet the needs of their student population. One component of the global budget is devoted to students with disabilities and impairments. In 2002, \$224 million has been allocated to the disabilities and impairments component and will support around 18,000 students. Of those students, 12,000 are in mainstream schools and 6,000 are in special schools.

In addition to this targeted funding, it is important to understand that students with disabilities benefit directly from other types of funding in the school global budget. Depending on individual needs and circumstances, funding can also be drawn from the special learning needs, rurality and isolation, and priority programs components to support these students. This funding is devoted, among other things, to student welfare services, reading recovery, literacy and numeracy, and Koori specific assistance. These financial arrangements enable schools to provide a package of intervention and support tailored to the needs of individual students with disabilities.

One of my colleagues here today is Mr John Livi, the department's solicitor. I am not proposing to make an application under paragraph 14 of the resolutions agreed to by the Senate for the protection of witnesses for approval for Mr Livi to accompany us, as his presence here is not for the protection of us as witnesses but because of the legal nature of some of the aspects of the inquiry and our submission. I trust that this meets the committee's procedures.

**CHAIR**—Yes.

**Ms Tait**—My colleagues and I will endeavour to answer any questions the committee might want to put to us.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much. I thank the department for the work that you have put into the preparation of your submission. As you said, it clearly provides a very broad picture of what is happening in this state. As for solicitors before Senate committees, I have yet to find one that

has been able to slow us down with regard to the pursuit of information. I find, in fact, that most bureaucrats are much better equipped at avoiding answering questions than solicitors!

I will ask you for a little bit more information that is not provided in your submission. Given that this is a Senate inquiry, we are interested to know about the Commonwealth's role in the provision of services and, in particular, about the effectiveness of Commonwealth programs as you experience them. Can you indicate to us what the total expenditure is? I think you have indicated a figure of \$224 million for the disabilities program and various other programs, which I presume would include transport.

**Ms Tait**—In fact, the transport figure was in addition to that. I will ask my colleague Deb King—

**CHAIR**—So how much is the Victorian government spending on students with disabilities?

**Ms D. King**—Specifically on students with disabilities, the state government contributes \$222 million to the disability and impairments program from state appropriation funds. There is another \$2 million that comes from Commonwealth appropriation for students in government schools. On top of that, specifically for students with disabilities, from state appropriations there is another \$21 million provided for school transport services. There is also another \$4.6 million provided by the state government to non-government schools for the provision of support to students with disabilities in the non-government sector. So the state contribution in total is \$247.6 million. The Commonwealth contribution specifically for students with disabilities in government schools is \$110 per student, with a total in the 2001-02 financial year of \$1.87 million. For students in non-government schools, where they provided \$561 per student in 2001-02, the contribution was \$2.68 million. So the specific contribution from the Commonwealth to students with disabilities in Victorian schools was \$4.55 million.

**CHAIR**—I must say the figures are slightly larger in New South Wales. I am surprised that that is so low.

**Ms D. King**—As Sue outlined, we provide—

**CHAIR**—No, I do not mean Victoria's own expenditure. The way I read it, if you include your transport costs, your integration works program—facilities modifications—and you include the moneys for the expansion of the special schools—you have 80; I presume you are building one or so a year—you get a figure of around \$250 million. I would have thought the Commonwealth's contribution would have been higher than the four or so million that you mentioned.

**Ms D. King**—I should say that that was money specifically per student—that is the particular per capita allocation per student from the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth has a fund called SAISO—Strategic Assistance for Improving Student Outcomes—which includes that per capita funding for individual students plus additional funding, including \$35 million for literacy support, \$9.5 million for special education school support and \$3 million for special education capital funds.

**CHAIR**—I understand that. But that is the broadbanded moneys; it is not quite as tight a definition as you would use for your other funding. In New South Wales the Commonwealth's

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contribution is just under \$20 million. I would have thought in Victoria, given the pro rata, it would be around \$14.5 million to \$15 million.

**Ms D. King**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—Irrespective of the precise numbers, it would be a tiny proportion. If the state is spending \$250 million and the Commonwealth is spending about \$14.5 million to \$15 million, assuming my figures are right—

**Ms D. King**—It is \$14.5 million if you take into account the individual funding plus the \$9.5 million for—

**CHAIR**—Yes. If you compare it to New South Wales, that is about the equivalent figure I would come up with. It seems to me that there is a very small contribution coming from the Commonwealth in that area. If we were to think about the Commonwealth programs specifically, what do you think could be done to improve them? I presume you will tell us you want more money, like everyone else—I am not surprised by that—but what else do you think can be done to improve the Commonwealth programs' operations in this state?

**Ms D. King**—I think our submission included quite a bit of information about what the Victorian position was in relation to what we felt the Commonwealth could do to further their support for students with disabilities. In summary, the submission provided several things. There is currently a disparity in funding for support in preschools—where the preschool funding is provided by DEST, the Department of Education, Science and Training—versus students in child care, where the specialist funding is provided by FACS. And funding is provided at different levels. So that was one area that we thought needed attention, and we included that in our submission.

A second area that we suggested was national consideration for providing adequate support for children in the preschool years. A third area that we outlined in our submission was more equitable funding arrangements that recognised that those most at risk of not achieving national goals for schooling are in government schools. Students with disabilities are a key group in that area and the majority are in government schools, whilst we acknowledge that a significant minority are in Catholic schools and some are certainly in independent schools.

We also recommended that the Commonwealth consider amending the Disability Discrimination Act and providing funding assistance for states to ensure that all sectors can comply with the proposed disability standards that are currently being prepared. We also advocated a national cooperative approach to action around the national goals for schooling, rather than continuing to have unilateral action on behalf of the Commonwealth.

**CHAIR**—In your submission to the states grants bill, if I recall, the Victorian department argued that the funding formula under that states grants bill would in fact lead to a situation where it would not be possible to fund all students to allow them to meet the national goals for schooling. I take it that that is still the position of the department; is it?

**Ms D. King**—Yes, it is.

**CHAIR**—So do you think the inequity in the funding has anything to do with that funding formula itself?

**Ms D. King**—Yes, we do think so.

**CHAIR**—You have not changed your view on that?

**Ms D. King**—No, we have not changed our view at all.

**CHAIR**—I have a few other matters. On the question of the Victorian government's own policies, the issue that has come up again and again is the need for early intervention. You point to the need for the Commonwealth to improve its coordination in terms of early childhood education—I can see there is considerable argument in favour of that—between the different departments, particularly for preschool and what are called 'kindergarten programs' in Victoria. What action is the Victorian government taking to improve its coordination of early childhood services, particularly given that the same problems occur in this state with regard to a division of administrative responsibility between two departments?

**Ms Tait**—We do indeed have a division of responsibility between the two departments. One of the actions that the government is taking is to ensure that those departments work very closely together. Indeed, we have had a number of initiatives—the most recent is called Best Start—that have had the Department of Education and Training and the Department of Human Services working in partnership. In the instance of Best Start, they are joint auspicing partners of a \$7½ million project focusing on children aged zero to eight, looking at the potential for improvement in the service delivery to students and their families in those very early years of childhood, with a view to taking children through to eight years old. This is because by then children have completed their transition from babyhood to toddlerhood into preschool and, indeed, primary school. It is an initiative that will take 10 demonstration projects around the state in a variety of significant needy areas. It will enable us to research what can be best practices, on the ground, of the three tiers of government, engaging local government and community agencies in the support for children and families as well. That is just one example of the initiatives that we have undertaken as two departments.

Other examples are the range of activities that currently occur and will be expanded between the Department of Education and Training and the Department of Human Services. In relation to the transition of four-year-olds out of preschool and into primary school, as prep begins at five years old, the arrangements that we are looking to further strengthen in those areas would be the linkages between the preschool field officer service that is run by the Department of Human Services, the preschool teachers that run the preschool centres and our prep teachers in primary schools. The linkages between those and the capacities for those groups to work together will help to identify children at risk and to better coordinate the responses to meet the needs of those children as they move into primary school. Part of that process is also to look at how parents can be engaged early on in the identification of children with particular needs, and so the role of the maternal and child health care centres leading into the preschool environment is also an important transition point. Those are the sorts of connections that we want to be strengthening both within departments and between departments.

We also run a range of joint briefings every year prior to the application process for our students coming into education and DHS's clients coming out of preschool who have particular

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special needs. Those programs are run on a regional basis in a number of places throughout the state. They are targeted towards parents, teachers and preschool workers to get them working together, again around the transition points, to engage and to continue the support that children might be experiencing in this area. They are a couple of the initiatives.

**CHAIR**—Ms Tait, apart from historical anachronism, how is it possibly justified to have a division like this between preschools and schools?

**Ms Tait**—It is a policy decision of the government.

**CHAIR**—I appreciate the point that you make. It is a point I make wherever I go, I might say. Mr Livi, a MCEETYA working party has now been in operation for seven years. Obviously, people have gotten to know each other extremely well during that period, but it has produced—apart from a whole series of meeting itineraries—bugger all. I notice that the Victorian government has not signed off on the new standards being proposed. Why not?

**Mr Livi**—The Victorian government cannot do it by itself. A number of states, as you would know, in the Commonwealth will need to sign off on it. In essence, there are two main areas of concern: one is some legal issues and the other is the full cost analysis or implications of the standards. As far as the legal issues are concerned, there are four easily identified legal issues. The first is that the standards will seek to extend the unjustifiable hardship defence to all aspects of a child's education, whereas the disability act at the moment enables that unjustifiable hardship defence only at the point of enrolment of a student. The question is asked: can standards actually extend that defence which presently is limited under the act?

The second aspect is that the standards seek to extend the standards and the operation of the act to those bodies in education whose purpose it is to develop an accredited curriculum, whereas at the moment the disability act does not extend to those bodies. The third aspect is that the standards seek to impose on educational bodies the obligation to develop and implement strategies and programs to prevent discrimination. At the present time, the disability act only prohibits harassment of students by staff, and the standards will seek to impose additional obligations on educational authorities.

Lastly, as an easily identifiable legal issue, section 31(4) of the Disability Discrimination Act will need to be amended. The section initially refers to standards being introduced into parliament, and it goes on to say that the guidelines then become law or do not become law depending on whether there have been amendments. There is slippage in that section between reference to standards and reference to guidelines. If one passed the standards as they presently are, you would be left with the question: what is the section referring to; namely, guidelines or standards? I am sorry, Chair, did you have a question?

**CHAIR**—No, that is fine. I am listening to your answer.

**Mr Livi**—The second major issue that I understand the states are addressing are the full cost implications of the implementation of the standards once they are properly formulated.

**CHAIR**—That is what I was waiting for, Mr Livi. To what extent do think these issues are about costs and to what extent do you think they are about legal interpretations?

**Mr Livi**—My own personal view?

**CHAIR**—You are here to represent the department. I will not tell you how to answer a question—you are entitled to answer it any way you see fit.

**Mr Livi**—I can only give you my involvement, and that has been from the legal analysis of the standards.

**CHAIR**—Would another officer be better placed to answer a question like that?

**Mr Livi**—I think so.

**CHAIR**—Ms Tait, what do you think? Where does the balance lie? Between the question of legalities or the question of costs?

**Ms Tait**—I think that we need to continue those discussions with the MCEETYA ministers. I do not think that I can answer on their behalf, but we, certainly within the department, would want to have the view that we were working very actively to promote a resolution of the issues.

**Ms D. King**—To add to that, at the recent MCEETYA meeting, all of the ministers present—the Commonwealth and the state ministers—expressed their concern over the delay in achieving the standards; committed themselves to the production of standards, which was a significant commitment; and expressly asked the working party to address the outstanding legal and financial issues by December of this year.

**CHAIR**—So it has slipped already—I thought they were going to do that by July.

**Ms D. King**—As you are probably aware, there has been a Federal Court decision in New South Wales called the Purvis decision, which John is much more able to talk about than I am, that affected quite significantly the development of the standards. That only emerged earlier this year; hence there was some delay. There now are, as you have heard, quite a few legal issues which do really need to be resolved and are not resolved, and the Commonwealth has acknowledged that they are not adequately addressed currently in the draft standards. So the Commonwealth has also acknowledged that the draft standards do not adequately pick up the issues that John has outlined. Regarding the financial issues, there has been work by the working party to develop a regulatory impact statement, as you would for any other regulation. It has been very difficult for them to isolate the potential cost impacts of the draft standards, but it remains a concern to all jurisdictions—

**CHAIR**—Of course it would.

**Ms D. King**—and, presumably, the Commonwealth, that we do not end up with something which is unmanageable and unimplementable, because we and the disability community really want to have a workable set of standards.

**CHAIR**—I am not disputing for a moment that the question of costs is not a matter of enormous significance but, when talking about intergovernment relations, it is always an interesting topic to actually work out to what extent the issues are being driven by costs or by

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questions of power distribution. My reading of your submission suggests that you are actually looking for amendments to the act.

**Ms D. King**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—You are looking, essentially, for the Commonwealth to fund this operation. Your complaint is that the Commonwealth is passing legislation without studying fully the implications of its costs.

**Ms D. King**—Yes, exactly.

**CHAIR**—I have one final question, and my colleagues have other questions to ask you. We have had complaints put to the committee from parents. No doubt you will tell us how well things are going in regard to parental access, and teachers tell us that things are going extremely well, both in the private sector and in the public sector, although I thought today there were some serious matters raised by the teachers themselves about the conflict. We had a complaint specifically put to us yesterday regarding Taylors Lakes Secondary College. Are you able to tell us anything specifically about the particular matter that was raised with the committee? Secondly, a more general question, are you able to comment on the observation that parents seem very dissatisfied with the level of service that is being provided across the country and in this state as well?

**Ms Tait**—I can answer that. We did indeed follow up on the particular issue that was outlined yesterday, and I can advise you that the student concerned, who is now 18 years old, has been receiving level-4 funding of approximately \$19,570. That is a relatively high, proportionately, level of funding for that student. He is currently attending Taylors Lakes two days a week and he is attending another school—St John of God, a private school—three days a week. He is actually continuing to receive the full funding for five days of the week at Taylors Lakes Secondary College. He has had an individualised program developed for him and has a full-time aide in the period of time that he is currently at Taylors Lakes—and that aide is, indeed, a qualified teacher. Planning has commenced for the student for 2003 for him to join the Futures for Young Adults program and there have been three program support groups held this year with his parents. In none of those program support groups has his mother raised any of the concerns that she raised yesterday.

On the issue of the capacity for him to return to Sunshine SDS, we have been unable to find further detail in relation to that, but we will pursue that. However, the student could not return to any school after he turns 18, because the requirement is that he would then move into the Futures for Young Adults program. That may be part of the confusion there and we will follow that up.

There were some problems in 2001, and Taylors Lakes has addressed those. They did acknowledge that there was a degree of concern that they felt in terms of their processes, and they have been working to address those significantly. They were surprised when we outlined to them the nature of the concerns which had been expressed here. In following that particular issue through—we have obviously only had time to do that in a very preliminary way—we would be expecting to work with the regional director to ensure that there is a very clear follow-up with that individual parent.

One of the things that we would want to ascertain is the use, for instance, of translation services in the program support groups, to what extent she feels she can, in fact, engage in the discussion in relation to her child and to what extent is there a need for counselling for her, or indeed her with her child, in relation to the severity of his needs. He is a high-needs child and he is moving out of a system of schooling into something which is—from their point of view, and I am surmising here—unknown; he is moving into an adult environment, which is creating considerable anxiety. In addressing those anxieties we would be wanting to pursue that as an individual instance, and we will do so. I am happy to provide you with further information later.

**CHAIR**—Before we deal with the general problem, my understanding of the evidence given yesterday—and, Senator Tierney, correct me if you have a different impression—was that the witness actually said that these matters had been raised with the school principal and officers from the Department of Human Services. So there were education representatives there as well as other departmental representatives there. She told the committee that this information had been raised through formal channels.

**Ms Tait**—She did, indeed, and we have been unable in the 18 hours since then to seek advice from the other department, but we will certainly be following it up. We would expect, as a department, that the quality of communication between our principals and our teachers and our integration aides was such that our parents were indeed able to engage—and feel empowered—within the relationship, and she clearly did not feel that. So we would want to address that.

**CHAIR**—Senator Tierney, you had a supplementary question.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Yes, I did. You mentioned that the funding and the programs were right. It seems to turn on the nature of the relationship between the people in that situation. You expressed it as a degree of concern; I would express it as a degree of alarm.

**Ms Tait**—Sorry?

**Senator TIERNEY**—If you had heard her evidence directly yesterday—rather than reading a transcript—you would have been very moved.

**CHAIR**—Ms Tait was here.

**Ms Tait**—Yes.

**Senator TIERNEY**—You were here then—sorry. Well, I am sure you were very moved by her genuineness about the situation she was in.

**Ms Tait**—I do not deny that for a second.

**Senator TIERNEY**—You cannot help thinking that the fact that she was from Egypt and her language skills were not very good was part of the difficulty. In terms of ethnic groups where there are difficulties like this, do you bring in other sorts of support? She almost needed an interpreter, I think, to enable her to express herself—although she did have some English.

**Ms Tait**—I agree with you. I think she did need an interpreter. If what we were hearing—that is a bad pun—was translated into the school level, I would say that she did need an interpreter. That is part of the service we offer.

**Senator TIERNEY**—But it was not provided in this case.

**Ms Tait**—It certainly did not appear to have been provided in this case, and that is something that I want to follow up. But clearly principals and parents—through the publications we put out to them when they are going through application and review processes—are very clearly advised that the translation and interpreter service is freely available. We gave you a copy of those publications yesterday and we have brought more copies today. The translation and interpreter service is available for the preparation of applications and it is available as required at any time for program support groups.

**Senator TIERNEY**—That is assuming they understand that communication in the first place.

**Ms Tait**—Indeed, and it also presumes that the principals have recognised that there is a need to offer that in the first instance. That is one of the things that we would want to follow up.

**Senator TIERNEY**—There is another dimension of this that I think you should follow up. It seemed to come across that there was a level of callousness in the way the child was treated. Obviously, there were issues with other pupils as well, and the way the school handled all of that may also need to be investigated, because in terms of her evidence the people involved were not coming out of it very well.

**CHAIR**—We are at a disadvantage in not being able to have the full information in front of us.

**Senator TIERNEY**—That is what I am asking for.

**Ms Tait**—We are at a disadvantage; there are never just two sides to these stories, but probably 20.

**Senator TIERNEY**—I realise that.

**Ms Tait**—We clearly heard—as did you—a parent in distress and we will follow that up. That is not the sort of story we would like to be told.

**Senator TIERNEY**—You could perhaps provide a copy of that report to the committee when it is ready.

**Ms Tait**—Certainly.

**CHAIR**—Our concerns were about the allegations of violence directed at the child, and I was disturbed by the evidence in regard to the toilet training. We are talking about a person, as you say, who needs substantive assistance. The fact that you have classified the student as a level 4 suggests that a lot of help was required, and it appears not to have been given. It raises the issue

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of the way in which funding is distributed to the school. That relates to the point I was making before about the parents' complaints. Some of the evidence we have heard is that these parents have often been through the mill, they have had high exposure to frustration, they are angry and, if you like, they are not going to take it any more. I think we saw a bit of that yesterday. To what extent do you think the programs ensure that resources go to the student in the current administrative framework?

**Ms Tait**—I think the strategies that we have in place, upon which the program is built, ensure that. The chief mechanism for that is the program support group. In this particular instance there have been three program support groups already this year with that particular parent in attendance. We will have to try to ascertain how comfortable she felt in that circumstance because she had not expressed earlier those concerns that she expressed yesterday. The program support group, as a regular part of the relationship and communication base between the parent, child, teacher, aide and principal—whichever people are deemed most appropriate—is a critical component of our program and approach.

We do run a number of professional development programs and a range of briefings for principals in relation to the use of program support groups, and obviously we can continue to improve that. In fact the recent review of services for children with special education needs in Victoria—although it is not publicly out yet—will highlight the need for us to provide further support to the effectiveness of program support groups. I think that is a clear strategy and we have to keep on working at ensuring that, as Senator Tierney said, the relationships work on the ground because it is on the ground that they are tested. These are parents who have frequently had to battle, as they see it, on behalf of their children in order to do the best by them. They are parents who are under stress to start off with.

**CHAIR**—Can we have a copy of that report as soon as it is available?

**Ms Tait**—Yes, by all means. That will be ongoing work. Certainly, in the most recent kit that we have distributed, with the application process for the 2003 round for our disability program there is specific support included in here—recommendations, a checklist for principals and information for parents as to what they should be doing and what they can expect and ask for in relation to the operation of those program support groups. It is also in parent friendly language. But that does not mean that people feel empowered to read it necessarily.

**Senator ALLISON**—With regard to the definition of disability, I have read your section starting at page 15 on this subject and note the additional definitions that have been inserted on the basis of the interpretation of HREOC. If I may say so, there seems to be a fairly legalistic response to the question of learning disability being included in the definition of disabilities. Does the Victorian state government have another approach at all? I note that you talk about the need for expanding the Commonwealth definition in order, presumably, to increase the number of students who would receive the \$110 from the Commonwealth. Is it your position that learning disability should now be seen as a disability for the purposes of extra funding?

**Ms Tait**—I think we have probably got a couple of ways to answer you, Senator Allison. Perhaps John would like to start.

**Mr Livi**—Yes. On the one hand the definition of disability on page 15, as I understand it, is the definition from the Disability Discrimination Act, whereas, if one goes to attachment 3 of

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our submission, that is the criteria for determining access to the disabilities and impairments program for the relevant funding. You are right. There is not a direct correlation between the two definitions. By way of example, page 40 refers to the relevant criteria for eligibility under the disabilities and impairments program. It defines a physical disability as a 'significant physical disability' or a 'significant health impairment' and—

**Senator ALLISON**—Yes, I do understand what the current arrangements are. My question is: given the education standards coming along, what is the Victorian government's position with regard to learning disability? Would you like to see a definition in there either for the purposes of the Commonwealth providing funding for that group or not, and what is the thinking of the Victorian government with regard to the need for extra funding for learning disability?

**Mr Livi**—I will take the first part of the question about whether there should be a definition in the standards. The present standards merely adopt the definition from the Disability Discrimination Act. If we move away from that definition, we then run into all sorts of legal issues as to whether or not we can move away from the definition. I just repeat that the standards use the present definition of disability under the Disability Discrimination Act.

**Ms Tait**—What we do have as a department is a strong commitment to support children with special learning needs. In addition to our disabilities program, we have a range of other programs and funding sources directly targeting children who have difficulties in their learning programs. The special learning needs funding, which is part of the school global budget, targets 60 per cent of the schools based on an index arrangement which looks at socioeconomic and a range of other factors of disadvantage—

**Senator ALLISON**—I think you say here that over 10 per cent of the student population would be recognised as disabled if learning disability were included. That is probably a bit conservative. Of the programs you currently have running, what does that mean for that 10 per cent in terms of expenditure per capita?

**Ms Tait**—I would probably have to take that on notice, Senator, in order to give you a per capita figure, but I can certainly give you an indication of the programs that we have running in relation to funding sources. I guess I would reference, too, for instance, the student welfare coordinators, \$13.1 million; early years initiatives such as the Literacy Coordination Program, \$25.6 million; the reading recovery priority program, \$31 million; the managed individual pathways priority programs, \$14.1 million—

**Senator ALLISON**—Is this included under the \$247.6 million state contributions?

**Ms Tait**—No, it is not. These are all additional funds.

**Senator ALLISON**—These are literacy-type programs—understood.

**Ms Tait**—These are funds for supporting students who may be experiencing difficulties with their learning but who are not eligible for the disability program.

**Senator ALLISON**—Okay. So the total amount of those programs?

**Ms Tait**—In terms of giving you an accurate figure, I would probably want to give you that on notice.

**Senator ALLISON**—That would be good.

**Ms Tait**—But to give you the flavour of the scope of programs that we run, if I add those up very quickly, we are very close to \$100 million there.

**Senator ALLISON**—Let me ask you directly about criticisms that have been levelled at this and other state governments in terms of learning disability. They concern the lack of capacity for schools and the system to have those students diagnosed at an early age. What is the situation with regard to state funding for diagnosis? Is it part of the global school budget? Do we just expect the school to fund it if they can?

**Ms Tait**—No, we do not just expect the school to fund it. We have a program for the student support service officers, which is approximately \$43 million of state funding given out via regions to networks of schools to provide student support service officers such as visiting teachers, education psychologists, guidance officers, speech pathologists, social workers and sometimes youth welfare workers—a range of support staff. Of that \$43 million, \$2 million is set aside specifically for the assessment of students and specifically as part of the disabilities program. Many of the workers who are employed from the rest of that \$43 million are involved in running programs. The education psychologists, for instance, would do an education assessment of a student who may not be eligible for the disability program but who may have learning needs which need to be identified. Those staff are performing those sorts of assessments all year round.

**Senator ALLISON**—So you would be surprised to learn that a parent felt the need to have an outside consultant, a psychologist or somebody like that, do such an identification of learning difficulty or disability.

**Ms Tait**—I would probably want to know the particular circumstance. It is the case that, regardless of it being a large resource—\$43 million is a lot—it is still a scarce resource in terms of how it can be distributed across a broad state. In some areas there may well be a situation where there needs to be a waiting list for people to access a particular assessment that they may be wishing to have. I would not be surprised at that, but a parent may certainly choose to have an independent assessment done if they wish. However, the service is there and it is highly regarded.

**Senator ALLISON**—What is the longest waiting list in Victoria?

**Ms Tait**—I am sorry, I would not have that information. It is managed cooperatively at the local network level by groups of principals and overseen, in an accountability sense, by the regional directors.

**Senator ALLISON**—Is it the case that in Victoria there is a screening process for disabilities and for hearing and vision impairment?

**Ms Tait**—Yes, there is.

**Senator ALLISON**—For every child? At what level in schools?

**Ms Tait**—In terms of the Department of Human Services—and I cannot give you details for them; we would have to take that on notice—there is clearly a screening process that happens through the Maternal and Child Health Service.

**Senator ALLISON**—So it is not through schools; it is through Maternal and Child Health?

**Ms Tait**—Indeed. But there is also the primary school nurses program that is run through the Department of Human Services. Again, to give you detail in relation to that I would have to take it on notice. That process screens preps and it picks up children who may have evidenced hearing or vision impairments. We, as an education department, also run what we call the Prep Entry Assessment Program, which is a different sort of screening program for every child who enters the prep classroom. That is done in the first few weeks of a child starting school and provides an excellent range of diagnostic information for teachers to then work on. Obviously there is close communication in those early prep intake periods in relation to identifying particular needs of children.

**Senator ALLISON**—So you would be confident that every child who enters the school system would be screened—at whatever age? Would students who come from other states be screened?

**Ms Tait**—No. The screening under the Prep Entry Assessment Program is an entry to school program at prep—it is a beginning school program. There would not be the same screening of students who were enrolling at grade 4 or year 7. However, if a child has come from interstate and has particular disabilities, then there will presumably be a record of that and the parent will bring that with them. Obviously that would be something that, upon enrolment, would be considered with the principal of the school.

**Senator ALLISON**—The previous witnesses represented the Australian Association of Teachers of the Deaf and they expressed great concern about the current shortage of specialist teachers of the deaf. Does your department share that concern and, if so, are there any measures in place to provide incentives for specialist teachers?

**Ms Tait**—We certainly would share a concern to get quality teachers of all sorts into the system. That means special education teachers and teachers of languages other than English—in a range of languages. Certainly, I am aware of the concern of the deaf-education advocates that there is an apparent lack of deaf-education staff in schools as well. In terms of us having a capacity to provide incentives, the government has a policy of recruitment and we need to operate within that policy. The issue of how we can promote teachers to take on the postgraduate qualifications required for special education is something that we would like to encourage.

**Senator ALLISON**—How are you encouraging that?

**Ms Tait**—We would be looking to have discussions with the universities on the courses they provide.

**Senator ALLISON**—But you have not done that thus far?

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**Ms Tait**—We have not done that specifically in relation to deaf education thus far, but it is something that we have been having discussions about.

**Senator ALLISON**—How would you overcome the disincentive of HECS fees and the fact that a teacher might do an extra year of study but come out and be paid at the same level as a beginning teacher?

**Ms Tait**—That is actually an issue for any teacher who undertakes a postgraduate degree, whether it be a diploma, a Masters of Education or a PhD. There is no recognition in a financial sense for increased payment in relation to that. On the strategies that the department is undertaking: there is a recruitment program that has been under way and that we will be re-engaging very shortly, and within that context we would want to be seeing the promotion of special education skills.

**Senator ALLISON**—And how would you do that promotion? What steps will you take to make a difference?

**Ms Tait**—I think that is a conversation we would need to have with our human resources strategy people, and I will be happy to take that on notice.

**Senator ALLISON**—To pick up on one other thing from the previous witnesses, we talked about the likely case study of a student with profound deafness in a school who would have funding at a level of about \$14,000 per annum, which would probably pay for half the time of a teacher aide and some extra speech therapy or whatever other services. Could you respond to the question marks about what the school experience would be like for such a student. If they cannot understand what is going on for half of the school day, which must be the situation for the vast majority of them, what does the department expect those children to be doing in that time when they do not have any integration aids; when they cannot hear the teacher speak? What is your assumption of how that child manages?

**Ms Tait**—I will ask Jeanne to reply.

**Ms Norling**—The \$14,000 level 3 funding that has been referred to is based on the Educational Needs Questionnaire that is provided by the program support group during the application process. We do not fund children according to disability type; we fund based on 12 different indicators of educational need. That is what gives a level of funding. That is why a student with a hearing impairment will generally be on level 3 or above. That is why it varies from situation to situation. With the student in the school, for example, on the level 3 funding, I can speak from the experience of having worked with schools supporting students on that level of funding. They work within the school to develop strategies to include all their children in the classroom and they work in terms of strategies for overcoming some of those issues in certain classes. So there does not need to be one-to-one talking through an integration aid all the time for that communication to be facilitated.

**Senator ALLISON**—So what activities, for half of the day, would such a child engage in?

**Ms Norling**—It would not be for half of the day. We are talking about a range. Level 3 funding would generally fund more than half a day anyway, depending on the situation.



**Senator ALLISON**—What are teacher aides paid?

**Ms Norling**—It depends on the employment of the particular aide, whether it is through local employment or—

**Senator ALLISON**—Fourteen thousand dollars a year is not going to buy much in the way of aid, I would have thought, even for a lowly paid teacher aide.

**Ms Norling**—In our schools where aides are working, you may have two or three students in a classroom with special needs. You may have one student in one class; you may have one student in another class. Schools work together through their program support group to look at the best way to use those resources. In terms of the actual classroom activities, there are a range of activities that can be undertaken which do not necessarily require an aide working there. There are activities such as cooperative learning strategies that can be put into place in the classroom. There are activities such as using the computer, where all the students are engaged in the same sorts of activities, that do not necessarily need one-to-one aide in support all the time. In fact, we encourage our schools to look at ways to include the students in the activities that all of our students are participating in, rather than always relying on the aide. We are trying to get the schools to look at how they offer support for all their students in an inclusive way rather than treating one student as different all the time, working one-on-one with an aide.

**Senator ALLISON**—On the question of teacher aides, do you see a time coming in the not too distant future where all aides will be required to have at least a basic level of training in disabilities?

**Ms Tait**—We certainly have initiated a program for aides for school support officers—and aides are one category of those—to undergo training. We see that as both a necessary and an important part of the part of our human resources, whether those school support officers work in an administrative capacity in schools or work as teacher aides with children.

**Senator ALLISON**—Do you have a time frame in which 100 per cent of teacher aides or school support officers—whatever they are called—will have this basic training?

**Ms Tait**—Our policy at the moment is that we are providing a certified program which can access a range of different certificates for aides. At this point that is a voluntary arrangement, and that is the policy currently.

**Senator ALLISON**—So you do not intend to mandate qualifications of any sort for aides?

**Ms Tait**—At this point, that is a voluntary process, and that is certainly the policy of the department at the moment.

**Senator ALLISON**—What percentage of current aides will the funding allow to access it?

**Ms Tait**—Any aides currently employed within the department are able to access it; and it is an online program.

**Senator ALLISON**—How many hours is the course?

**Ms Tait**—It is 345 hours. In response to the question, ‘Approximately what time would it take a person to complete it?’ the answer is that it takes approximately 12 months for a new integration aide or administrative support staff to complete the program and complete the required assessment tasks in order to get the certification.

**Senator ALLISON**—Is the funding you provide for participation in the project or do you simply pay for the tuition?

**Ms Tait**—The funding that has been provided has been to develop the online training resources. But I would have to take the detail of that on notice to give to you.

**Senator ALLISON**—We are interested in the fact that teacher aides are not well paid. If they are expected to do this in their own time and pay fees to do it, I think it would be of interest to us. Another matter raised with the committee has been a major change in Victoria with regard to school counsellors, speech therapists and the like being available centrally. It was raised for the non-government sector as well that they were once able to access such special ed services and are not now. The suggestion was made that, overall, there are fewer such people available. Can you comment on that?

**Ms Tait**—I can: \$4.6 million is the amount allocated in 2002 which was previously part of that state-provided student support services funding—the \$43 million that I quoted to you previously. Of that, \$4.6 million goes—funding amount is indexed each year—directly to the Catholic Education Office and to the AISV, the Association of Independent Schools in Victoria, for distribution to Catholic and non-government schools. That was a policy decision that was taken at that time. Certainly, those funds have not diminished in that period of time, and they are available. However, they are available via the processes and protocols that are put in place by the Catholic Education Office and the AISV in particular.

**Senator ALLISON**—Have you had a chance to review the effectiveness of what is essentially allowing that current arrangement to be in place?

**Ms Tait**—Just as we provide very significant funding in a recurrent sense to the non-government sector, this is part of that funding.

**Senator ALLISON**—I realise that, but I am asking you about the effectiveness of that change.

**CHAIR**—There is direct evidence that the money is not spent as you have allocated it. This is not a problem that is unique to state governments, but I am wondering if you could comment on that. Are you aware that that allegation has been made?

**Ms Tait**—No.

**CHAIR**—Could you have a look at the *Hansard* of today and, if you have an opportunity to do that, could you give us a response to that.

**Ms Tait**—Yes, we will.

**Senator TIERNEY**—I would like to congratulate the Victorian education department on providing a 35-page submission, which is 10 times the size of the NSW department submission. It also contains some useful information and not just rhetoric. That is a good start. I would like to start with a very broad question relating to the whole policy of integrating children with disabilities into mainstream schools. Evidence we have had is that, through parental choice and other factors—the level of disability being one of them—one-third of children in Victoria in this situation are in specialist schools and two-thirds are in the mainstream.

Yesterday we saw the Western Autistic School, which was an excellent school. Let us just assume that those specialist schools are working well with highly qualified and well-trained staff doing an excellent job. That is certainly what we saw yesterday. My question relates to the standard of service that the remaining two-thirds are getting in the comprehensive school. The whole basis of integration, of course, was that it was the wish of the parents of children who have disabilities, that it was an educational judgment that these children should be—or could be—in those situations and that they would be there with sufficient support for their learning disability. Ms Tait, are you satisfied that that level of support in Victorian schools is sufficient?

**Ms Tait**—I will answer that in two ways. Firstly, I re-emphasise the policy of inclusion which this government has in terms of providing the opportunity for any child to attend a mainstream government school. Indeed, the policy underlying that has just been reinforced through the draft state disability plan, which is a 10-year plan promoting the inclusion of people with disabilities in all walks of life, including education. So the policy has been in place for a very considerable time, and it has recently been endorsed and strengthened through that draft document. It has not been released yet, but certainly the draft has been publicly consulted upon.

Similarly, the review of students with educational needs, which we undertook from the end of last year and earlier this year, has also reiterated the importance of a policy of inclusiveness and of parents having a choice—to send their children to a mainstream school or indeed to a specialist setting. So those policies of inclusion and of parent choice are two very important platforms that our program is based on and that will be strengthened into the future.

In terms of how we provide for the needs of students within mainstream settings, clearly the eligibility criteria are set and public. The amount of funding which is available to support that program is very considerable in terms of the numbers of students who are serviced. To get a line through the effectiveness of that program as our children experience it in our mainstream schools, we have recently had a go at tightening not just our accountability requirements of the program support groups in schools but also the requirements for how they report the success of those programs. I am happy to leave this document with you. *Measuring academic progress against each KLA for students with disabilities and impairments* is one of the recent documents we have put out to support our student outcomes and accountability framework. In this document, support is provided to teachers and principals of disabled students in mainstream schools to better judge and better report against the outcomes of the program that they are providing in their schools for our students who are disabled.

This process is being piloted in some of our schools which are going through their triennial review process just at this moment. I will not make a guess at the number; it is probably about a quarter of the schools. This process is being piloted now in each of those schools currently undertaking their three-year review process. The outcomes of that pilot will lead to that process being rolled out as a mandatory part of the triennial review process for all schools as they come

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up to their three-year review. That is one of the strategies that we have implemented in order to ensure that we do know that the programs that we are providing for our disabled children are indeed making a difference in the lives of those disabled children and their families. In terms of the other strategies we have, I wonder if Jeanne would like to follow up a wee bit in relation to some of the outcomes of program support groups and the like.

**Ms Norling**—If I can go back a step, in terms of the funding that we provide to schools, both our regular schools or mainstream schools and our specialist schools, they are both based on the same model: we have core funding, which is the per capita funding that goes into the school, and after that the funding is allocated through level funding, which is the funding as indicated earlier based on the Educational Needs Questionnaire. So a student with a particular disability, be they in a regular school or a specialist school, will get the same level of funding if the Educational Needs Questionnaire is scored in the same way. We do not differentiate in terms of the type of funding provided through level funding for the different types of schools.

In terms of the way that our regular schools and our specialist schools provide support for students with disabilities, the same sorts of programs are in place in both of types of schools. In regular schools and in specialist schools we have early literacy coordinators and reading recovery available for students. Similarly, we have managed the middle years programs. They are rolled out in both regular schools and specialist schools. There are similar programs being put in place in both of those different types of schools.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Thank you. The integration model has been in place for about 15 years plus. To return to my original question: are you satisfied that students with disabilities in mainstream classes are being provided with sufficient support for their needs?

**Ms Tait**—Certainly the fact that two-thirds of our families are choosing that environment for their students is an indication that parents are satisfied with that.

**Ms Norling**—In terms of retention rates as well, retention rates for students on our program for students with disabilities are increasing. There has been an increase of about 80 students in the last 12 months of students in regular schools who are on our program for students with disabilities.

**Senator TIERNEY**—We have had evidence today and yesterday from witnesses that are saying that there seems to be a move back from the integrated situation. Parents seem to be starting to vote with their feet who want to move back to specialist schools. One principal yesterday told us that his enrolments were up from 40 to 110 to date.

**CHAIR**—In the Geelong region.

**Senator TIERNEY**—So, given that you are saying the parents are satisfied, it does not seem to be an indication there of that.

**Ms Norling**—We monitor the growth in both sectors through statistics that we collect on a regular basis. The latest figures show that individually the figures for some schools are going up—and I mean special schools and regular schools—for students with disabilities; for others they are decreasing. There is no doubt about that. When we look at the actual growth in numbers of students in special schools, the growth this year slowed compared to last year, so

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that the growth in the last 12 months across the system—and I am not talking about an individual school—was less.

**CHAIR**—Given that there are also special centres within schools and they appear to be growing on the evidence that we have heard, is there any correlation between the effectiveness of the school principal in any particular district and their capacity to actually attract students?

**Ms Tait**—I think we are probably all very well aware of the importance of leadership in a school in the quality of the programs and the support for teachers to implement excellent programs. The quality of leadership in the school is a well-known and very important factor—that is no different in our special schools or our mainstream schools. As a department we are committed to building the skills and the leadership capacity of all of our principals and principal class people in order to ensure that we have got the best leaders and that those best leaders do make a difference to what happens in classrooms for children.

**CHAIR**—So you see no significant change in attitudes on the issue of integration as far as the parents of children with disabilities are concerned?

**Ms Tait**—We certainly do not see a difference one way or the other. We continue to see parents who rightly and vehemently pursue their desire for a choice. That choice can go either way. We continue to see that and we wholeheartedly support that.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Yesterday we saw Sunshine North Primary School. It was an excellent example of an integrated school which had, I suppose, a higher proportion than usual of students with disabilities. That school was doing an excellent job. I am sure you were showing us best practice but if we had randomly dropped in on some other school—and given that two-thirds of the students are in an integrated setting—would we have been likely to see exactly the same sort of thing?

**Ms Tait**—You would have seen a variety. Again, I will ask Jeanne to elaborate.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Not too much because we are short of time.

**Ms Tait**—Okay. You would see a variety of experiences. The thing that is excellent about Sunshine North is their capacity to deal with students who are eligible for the disability program and an almost equal number of students who are not strictly speaking eligible for the program but who have special learning needs. What is good practice in relation to that school is their capacity to bring together a variety of funding sources and programs in order to provide a coherent and integrated support for all of those kids together. In other locations you would see different levels of experience in relation to that.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Different levels of quality, as well?

**Ms Tait**—In any school you would see different levels of quality.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Would you see different levels of quality in terms of the approach to children who have disabilities?

**Ms Tait**—Certainly one of the things that we promote is best practice. Again, this has come through in much of the feedback to the review of educational services for students with special education needs. The advertisement of what else can be done—in the way schools are organised and the way programs are delivered—is something that principals and teachers are asking for and that is certainly something which we will be putting a lot of energy into in the very near future.

**Senator TIERNEY**—How can what you are talking about be delivered in the comprehensive school situation when teachers have probably had no training about this in their pre-service education and, the odds are, there is very little in-service training for classroom teachers in this area? How can you deliver quality programs to children with disabilities if there is virtually no pre-service training and very little and very patchy in-service training?

**Ms Tait**—I think you are making an assumption about little and patchy in-service training, and I will come back to that. In terms of pre-service training we do not currently have a requirement for a special education component in our pre-service training.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Why don't you have that?

**Ms Tait**—That is a policy decision and something which would need to be taken up with the universities in terms of what they provide.

**Senator TIERNEY**—I don't think it has to be taken up with the universities. In New South Wales it is mandated by the government. I think funding is attached to it and that is why they do it.

**Ms Tait**—It is not required in Victoria but certainly, as I indicated earlier, we are very interested in pursuing discussions with the universities in relation to such matters.

**Senator TIERNEY**—How on earth can a new teacher identify children with disabilities and learning difficulties if the teacher has had no preparation to do that? And how can they then apply appropriate teaching strategies if they have had no training to do that?

**Ms Tait**—The higher education pre-service training programs that operate are teaching adults how to become teachers. The sorts of strategies and approaches to teaching and learning that are current—and they are referenced, for instance, in our early years programs—are very prevalent in the pre-service training approaches right now. We are turning out some excellent young teachers, and schools are grabbing them at a great rate of knots. A new teacher coming into, let us say, a secondary school environment would not come in in isolation. Indeed most schools, which are very keen to get new young graduates, would have support processes for them in terms of mentor teachers and coaches, and would ensure that their growing aptitude to classroom teaching was totally supported. We provide a very significant amount of professional development in a range of areas.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Going back to your point about mentoring for the teacher who arrives at the school, how on earth can the teachers do that if they do not have the training themselves? The average age of the teaching force is about 45 years. When they were trained—and when Senator Carr and I were trained—there was no integration. There was a system where children

with disabilities went to special schools. Therefore, we were not given any preparation in this area and it does not seem to have changed very much even with the integration system.

**Ms Tait**—I think as a system we have learnt an enormous amount based on both research and practical experience in how we can best recognise and then work cooperatively to meet the needs of children with a range of abilities.

**Senator TIERNEY**—It would be terrific if the teachers knew that.

**CHAIR**—I did my Dip Ed at Melbourne University and I was then posted to Glenroy Technical School—and I must say I served with distinction for 10 years.

**Senator TIERNEY**—We will look at the record!

**CHAIR**—That's right, you will have a look at the record. There was a brilliant strategy developed up there of streaming, and in one of the early classes I was given I was allocated a group of 20 students—because we had a good union school—that, frankly, I had great difficulty dealing with because I was totally unequipped. I have not spoken to many teachers in the subsequent period that suggested to me that my experience was unique. Today, if a teacher was to come out of the Melbourne University teacher education program and be posted to Box Forrest School, how would it be different? Hopefully they have learnt not to stream kids, but how else would it be different?

**Ms Tait**—Without referring particularly to Box Forrest, I think that you would see a very focused approach around the middle years of schooling and strategies to better engage students in the middle years. I think you would see a very focused approach at Box Forrest around the restart program to identify students coming through into year 7 who have not come from primary school with the literacy skills that they require, and specific strategies in relation to the restart program generating from that. As a beginning teacher I think you would be teamed up in a mentoring way with an experienced teacher—and we do have two categories of teachers now: beginning and experienced—and you would be provided with support to address the classroom behaviour issues that would face you, the program planning for your children's educational programs and indeed the way you then account for those against the key learning areas of the curriculum support framework.

**CHAIR**—The other difference is that at that time there were 20 teachers employed under special needs programs. It was a school of 1,000 but class sizes were at 20; I think you will find that in today's world those 20 teachers would not be there and the class sizes would be more likely to be 28. Isn't it in fact more difficult for teachers, not easier, to cope with those sorts of learning difficulties in a mainstream classroom? I am not talking about children with quite serious disabilities.

**Ms Tait**—I think the complexity of classrooms and the issues that are facing young people, and therefore teachers when they are teaching young people today, is something that all of us would recognise. That is the first thing. How skilled we can become in terms of dealing with that complexity will in fact be the measure of our success in re-engaging students through the middle years—or not allowing them to become disengaged through the middle years.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Can I return to the question that I did ask: how does the teacher mentoring the new teacher provide them with appropriate strategies in relation to children with disabilities when they have had no pre-service training and probably very little in-service training? How do they do that?

**Ms Tait**—They have had a considerable number of years experience.

**Senator TIERNEY**—That is a fascinating theory of education you are coming up with there. How do you learn in that situation?

**Ms Norling**—Through a range of programs like the middle years initiatives there is significant professional development going on in schools.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Let us focus on that ‘significant level of professional development’. If I am a teacher in Box Forrest school, how many days of in-service training relating to children with disabilities could I expect in a typical year?

**Ms Norling**—Sorry, could you say that again?

**Senator TIERNEY**—How many days in a year could I expect in in-service training in relation to children with disabilities? I have had no pre-service training in it, I have started teaching, and it is my first year. How much in-service training am I going to get?

**Ms Tait**—There is no specific, mandated amount of time that is spent or required for teachers in particular professional development areas.

**Senator TIERNEY**—So the odds are that I could spend the first five years and get no training. Is that right?

**Ms Tait**—However, if a school, as part of its core school budget, is provided with a professional development funding amount—

**Senator TIERNEY**—How much per teacher?

**Ms Tait**—Approximately \$265, I think, but do not quote me.

**Senator TIERNEY**—How many days does that buy?

**Ms Tait**—It is not necessarily how many days it would buy, it is what nature of programs it would buy. A school puts that funding source together and then develops a whole-of-school professional development plan based on the needs of its teachers.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Let’s just get away from disabilities. How many days of in-service could I expect as a teacher in Victoria?

**Ms Tait**—There are currently four days which are deemed as pupil free days and an additional day for the secondary schools in terms of VCE.



**Senator TIERNEY**—Okay, four or five. That covers all curriculum areas—

**Ms Tait**—There are five pupil free days—

**Senator TIERNEY**—and all educational issues.

**CHAIR**—They are for writing reports.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Oh, that is for writing reports!

**Ms Norling**—No, that is different again.

**CHAIR**—Really?

**Ms Norling**—Yes, it certainly is!

**Ms Tait**—A school determines how it uses those pupil free days and, in addition, there is a per teacher allocation of professional development support money. Schools build a program around that, Senator, in terms of the needs of their staff and the specific programs that they are running.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Look, I am sure that they do, but what we have a problem with here is the scale of what is happening—the scale of the problem and the scale of the response. I am sure that these things happen but, if the average teacher is going to get one day a week in-service on this, what does it mean in terms of their professional development and their ability to help these children? We would really prefer it if public servants were upfront with us and said, ‘Look, there are not enough resources in this area and—gee!—the Commonwealth should provide us with some resources.’ We might go back and write a report and say, ‘Give them more resources for in-service!’ But you are trying to make out that it is all right when it is not.

**Ms Tait**—We would always welcome new resources for professional development for teachers.

**Senator TIERNEY**—I am sure you would. But do not tell us that it is okay, because we held an inquiry into gifted children and we found exactly the same thing. It seems that atypical children, no matter what side of the spectrum they are on, are inappropriately provided for in this country.

**CHAIR**—I can offer some assistance here. The Commonwealth professional development program was abolished. It was \$80 million a year, and they have now tried to introduce some bodgie arrangement to replace it.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Well, if that has happened, we should review that, Senator Carr, but we are not going to review it if the states come before us and say, ‘Everything is fine.’

**CHAIR**—Senator Tierney, I agree with your assessment. It is often helpful for us to know what the situation is in this place.

**Ms Tait**—We would certainly welcome any further input from the Commonwealth in relation to teacher professional development.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Okay. Let's go back to the way in which you are spending money, in terms of how this money is then allocated. One of the officers said that the same programs that are in special schools are also in regular schools. Given what we saw yesterday, which were highly trained, highly specialist teachers delivering what I am sure are excellent programs in that situation, how on earth can that then be also delivered in the integrated situation if there is such a lack of training for the teachers and such a lack of resources? How can it be the same?

**Ms Norling**—I am a bit confused about the question. Are you asking whether the lack of professional development applies only to the regular schools?

**Ms Tait**—I think the senator's question refers to your comment in terms of—

**Senator TIERNEY**—The same programs.

**Ms Tait**—the programs that are provided in regular schools being replicated in specialist schools.

**Senator TIERNEY**—That's right.

**Ms Tait**—The sorts of programs we are talking about there are—

**Ms Norling**—Priority programs, like early years, middle years and reading recovery.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Yes.

**Ms Tait**—In terms of what you saw in Western Autistic yesterday, which was highly specialised, dealing with very high needs children—all of them at, if not above, level 6—those children clearly would not be necessarily receiving a reading recovery program as such, but the funding into special schools for the sorts of priority programs that we have in early years literacy, early years numeracy and middle years programs is made available to the special schools, as it is to the regular schools. Therefore—

**Senator TIERNEY**—Let's turn to higher functioning students, say, level 2. I assume you can have level 2 students in specialist schools.

**Ms Tait**—You can, and often do.

**Senator TIERNEY**—In terms of delivery to level 2 students, are you saying that the level of support and education is the same in specialist schools as in comprehensive schools?

**Ms Tait**—Certainly, programs such as reading recovery and the middle years initiatives which are currently under way would be as available in the school of the principal you talked to yesterday as they are in Kevin Pope's school that you visited yesterday. The level of need of the students would determine how those programs were put in place.

**Senator TIERNEY**—But how does the teacher deliver those if they have had no pre-service and very little in-service training? You are making out that they are delivered at a similar standard across both sectors, but how does that happen? You have specialist teachers in the special school, and you have non-specialists with very little support in the other. How does it happen to get equal quality?

**Ms Tait**—In fact, I think that we would find in our regular primary schools a vast number of our teachers would stand up and say, ‘I am an expert literacy teacher.’

**Senator TIERNEY**—What about in high school?

**Ms Tait**—I think you would find increasingly, particularly through the restart program and the middle years initiatives, teachers who would stand up and say, ‘I am an expert, a specialist, in this.’ What they are becoming specialists in is, in fact, a view of teaching and learning and of how we can best support that for all students including those with special needs. It is not just a one-off ‘This is what I do in order to be a good teacher’; it is a whole approach to teaching that is framed around a design which includes a very clear set of beliefs and values, very clear access to professional development and very clear and committed professional team collegiate mentoring within the school, which requires the leadership of the school to support it and which is based upon the involvement of parents as central partners in the education program. As a design model of improvement and school change, they are the sorts of experts that you would start to talk to in some of our schools.

**Senator TIERNEY**—That sounds very fine, but let us take the example of industrial science or something like that. We heard evidence yesterday from high school teachers, saying, ‘We do not have a clue how to handle these kids.’ I cannot see anywhere, pre-service or in-service, where they would pick it up. In those specialist areas, where teachers with very little support and very little training have children with learning disabilities in the mainstream, how do they really deal with that sufficiently?

**Ms Tait**—Let us repeat that we are very happy to hear from the Commonwealth in terms of additional funding. There have of course been the science initiatives that have been undertaken around the state, and they have had Commonwealth funding. Those processes would certainly pick up on inclusive strategies for mixed ability teaching.

**Ms Norling**—In fact they have carried out a couple of trials in special schools specifically to try to develop strategies to address the needs of students with learning difficulties et cetera.

**Senator TIERNEY**—That would be good if it all happens. You say you would welcome Commonwealth funding; I am sure you would. There is nothing stopping the state government, which has a global budget of its own, to increase its resources if it wants to in any area. Given that you control 88 per cent of the budget for state schools and we only control 12 per cent, your opportunity to expand that is incredible. But of course that is a policy matter, so I will not ask you questions related to that.

I want to go back to the classroom and the allocation of money in the integrated setting. There are school support officers who come in and assist, and you mentioned there was some training—certificate training, I think it was—for these people. Could you very quickly tell me what level of education a typical school support officer has when they come in to do that job?

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**Ms Tait**—It varies immensely.

**Senator TIERNEY**—What is the bottom line? What do they have to have as a minimum?

**Ms Tait**—Some of them are parents of integrated children. Some of them are teachers. That is the broad spectrum.

**Senator TIERNEY**—But do you have a minimum qualification?

**Ms Tait**—No, they do not have to have a minimum qualification.

**Senator TIERNEY**—So they do not even have to have the VCE to do that?

**Ms Tait**—No.

**CHAIR**—Many of them are older people and may not have had extensive secondary schooling.

**Ms Tait**—Indeed they are.

**Senator TIERNEY**—When you talked about giving them this skilled training, you mentioned the word ‘pilot’. Do they comprehensively get training or are you piloting training for these people?

**Ms Tait**—The program is a new one which was introduced last year. The take-up rate has been very encouraging. It is a pilot at this stage, but it is something which is available to all. Certainly, we would be encouraging support staff to take that up.

**Senator TIERNEY**—So for 15 years you have had integration and you have had no training for the people who are doing that?

**Ms Tait**—We have, in fact, had very regular regional programs which have been targeted for integration aides and teachers, often working together.

**Senator TIERNEY**—If I was one of those people, how much of that training could I expect a year? How many days?

**Ms Tait**—Depending on how it operates, you may be in a network which runs a network of integration aides and meets regularly once a month or you may not be in a network that operates that way. There is a great variety around the state. But you would have, with the support of your principal, a capacity to access in-service training, which we as a department have now strengthened with the introduction of the certificate.

**Senator TIERNEY**—If you cannot do that, you basically have a ‘tips for teachers’ approach. That is basically what is happening. They all sit in a group and discuss their experiences. No-one has preliminary training and very little in-service training, so it is a ‘tips for teachers’ approach where they discuss things. I am not saying that there is anything wrong with doing that, but I am just trying to establish what is happening.

**Ms Tait**—One of the key roles of the student support services staff—and you will recall that they are the education psychologists, the guidance officers, the social workers, the speech pathologists and the visiting teachers—is, in fact, supporting the integration aides and teachers of children with disabilities in the schools in their networks in precisely the sorts of professional development programs you are talking about.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Senator Carr asked you a question about the division between the Department of Human Services and the Department of Education and Training, and why that was the case. The fact is that sometimes that will create administrative problems as you work across two different bureaucracies. From your answer I picked up the impression that it was all a seamless web, but yesterday we had evidence from Mrs Taffe, a very well educated and highly articulate person, who explained to us her difficulties in the Albury region of trying to get some assistance. She realised her child, who had not quite reached school, needed assistance because of a disability, and she just had the most frustrating process of getting any advice or assistance. Why is that happening in the system? You were here; you would have heard that evidence.

**Ms Tait**—I was and I did. I agree with you. Mrs Taffe was very skilled and articulate and obviously good at finding out what she wanted. One of the issues in relation to deaf education and support for deaf education is that there is a variety of views of what is best and how to do it. Mrs Taffe obviously had a particular view of how she wanted her child supported. In that sense, in relation to programs of support available via the department, she accessed early intervention support for her child as a preschooler, but when he came to school age they were not, as we understand it—again, we had a very short period time to investigate that one—suited to the particular view of deaf education that she, appropriately, holds to. But it is not the same view of all parents of deaf students of what is appropriate for deaf education. Dealing with the variety of opinion about what is best is, of course, one of the interesting challenges for any department of education or, indeed, human services department.

**Senator TIERNEY**—I want to move on to the issue related to learning difficulties: the definition of ‘disabilities’ and that of ‘learning difficulties’. We had evidence this morning from one of the unions that, if combined, this group could make up up to 15 to 20 per cent of the school population. You mentioned a \$100 million program which, I assume from what you said, was to go beyond helping people with disabilities to help people with learning difficulties. As you do not define Asperger’s syndrome as being part of the disability, how do you assist those children with their learning difficulties—if that is how you are defining them in your system?

**Ms Tait**—Can I clarify this? I did not in fact refer to a \$100 million program; I listed a range of programs—

**Senator TIERNEY**—that added up to \$100 million.

**Ms Tait**—Approximately.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Okay.

**Ms Tait**—I would reiterate that those programs include the early years literacy and early years numeracy programs. They include reading recovery and shared specialist programs in very small rural schools. They include the restart initiative in secondary colleges and they will increasingly include the middle years initiatives in late primary and early secondary schooling

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which were announced in the recent budget. So the range of programs that we are talking about are to support students who have difficulties in their learning programs. Jeanne could specifically address the issue of Asperger's syndrome.

**Senator TIERNEY**—But as it is part of the autism spectrum, I am wondering why you are defining it in the way you are.

**Ms Norling**—In 1998 we had a panel of experts actually come together to look at the criteria for autism spectrum disorder. That panel included paediatricians, educational psychologists, speech pathologists, educational experts and people who were experts in the field of autism, such as Dr Laurie Bartak. In looking at that, the decision was made not to include the term 'Asperger's' in the criteria for autism spectrum disorder and that they would continue to have two standard deviations below the mean on a standard language assessment as part of the requirement. The experts found that the level of disability with the Asperger's children actually ranged from mild through to severe. They recommended for the children who were severe that we include in the criteria a mention of pragmatic language; that is, the social language that the child uses. They can have quite good expressive language skills but it is not socially appropriate in terms of its use. So those criteria were actually amended to pick up those students who were at that end of severity in terms of their communications at school and their interactions in terms of their Asperger's syndrome. At the same time we also recognise that the behaviour of some students, through their Asperger's syndrome—because it is very severe—is very marked, so those students will often become eligible for our program under the severe behaviour disorder criteria. So in fact we have a number of students with Asperger's at the severe end who are included as eligible for the program for students with disabilities and impairments.

**Senator TIERNEY**—But they come in under a different criterion and it is about a behavioural outcome?

**Ms Norling**—They can come in under autism spectrum disorder with a pragmatic language disorder or they can come in under severe behaviour disorder. For the students who are milder in terms of the behaviours being exhibited at a school level, there is a range of other supports that we look at putting in, from educational psychologists to other consultants working with the school to develop appropriate strategies.

**Senator TIERNEY**—Let us return to some evidence we had today about the identification at birth of children with certain disabilities and what that then opens up as a possibility. Early identification could mean early intervention, but we seem to be picking up from the evidence some frustration over a lack of services for parents to access if they suspect or if it is identified that their children have a disability. Would you comment on what they have said?

**Ms Tait**—I can but I will have to take it on notice, because it is properly a question which needs to be answered by the Department of Human Services.

**Senator TIERNEY**—I thought you might say that. Please take that on notice so we can get some information back on early identification.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much for coming today. I have kept you a bit longer than otherwise might have been anticipated but that goes to the quality of the submissions. That concludes today's proceedings.

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**Subcommittee adjourned at 4.45pm**