



Canberra Deaf Children's Association

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SUBMISSION TO THE ACT SPECIAL EDUCATION REVIEW

SUMMARY

The CDCA acknowledges that significant progress has been made in the provision of educational support to deaf and hearing impaired (HI) children in the ACT over the past 2 decades, but believes that several major issues still need to be addressed to ensure that hearing impaired children in the ACT have the best possible educational opportunities and outcomes.

ACHIEVEMENTS

- Inclusion into mainstream programs is now the expectation and reality for most hearing impaired (HI) children and their families, with consequent benefits to the children and their communities.
- Schools and teachers are generally interested in doing their best to support hearing impaired children, even when the children come from outside the Primary Enrolment Area (PEA).
- The support provided by the Itinerant Hearing Support Teachers (IHST) is invaluable. Particular strengths of the IHST are:
 - Providing therapy, advice and emotional support in the Early Intervention period, including playgroups which support parents and siblings as well as HI children
 - Preparing for and dealing with transitions between levels of schooling eg from preschool to kindergarten.
 - Liaising with other teachers and carers to create a holistic approach to the child's education, while being mindful of parental wishes and privacy issues. Some examples include working with classroom teachers to ensure they understand the child's needs and liaising with therapists at The Shepherd Centre (private provider of speech therapy for HI children under school age).

ISSUES TO BE RESOLVED

School Environments

- Problem: The acoustic environment in many ACT schools, especially those that feature open planning, is problematic for HI people. High ceilings, large expanses of glass and/or hard flooring and large spaces without noise barriers (such as doors and walls) conspire to magnify classroom and background noise, making it difficult for a HI person to hear with accuracy. This is compounded when there are many students within the space. In addition, having a large number of students within the space is visually distracting.
- Solutions: We accept that radically restructuring open plan classrooms is likely to be prohibitively expensive, however possible solutions are:
 - Adopt reasonably inexpensive means to improve the acoustic environment of classrooms and other school areas by:
 - use of room dividers, especially ones made of acoustic absorbing materials
 - softening walls with fabric
 - use of soft flooring
 - hanging artwork from the ceiling
 - appropriately positioning the teacher in relation to the children
 - maximising the use of assistive listening devices, such as FM systems.
 - Ensure that a high quality acoustic environment is provided in any new or upgraded schools.
 - Rate every school in the ACT for features that are needed by people with disabilities, including the HI. This rating must then be made public so that parents could compare and assess schools in relation to the needs of their children. Enrolment policies would also have to be modified to make it possible for parents to choose the school that best met the needs of their children, even if “out of area.” The likely effect of such changes would be that HI children would tend to go to the schools that have the highest rating for being “deaf friendly”, thereby reducing the number of schools across which the resources would be spread and therefore ensuring more focused support. **Note.** CDCA is not advocating that HI children be removed from mainstream programs or that they be forced to attend one of a limited number of schools.

General Issues Related to Teaching Support

- More formal communication between families and itinerant teachers is required. Parents need to know what the teachers/STAs can and can't do. Parents need to be given adequate warning of meetings and changes to schedules. Better articulation of acceptable methods of communication.
- Travel distances between student's schools for Itinerant Teachers. Reg 90 costs become very costly and eats into the budget.

Hearing Support Teachers

- The “mobility clause” is a big concern for parents of HI children. This is a condition of the teachers’ award which stipulates that all teachers must move to another school after a set number of years. The IHST are highly specialised and it is very unlikely that a suitable replacement could be found if they left the IHS Team. This would severely compromise support to all HI children. In addition, the teachers themselves would find it almost impossible to retain currency in teaching HI children if removed from that setting for a long period, further compounding the issue. We already have anecdotal evidence that the mobility clause has degraded teacher morale and has probably made transferring to the ACT less attractive for trained teachers of the deaf, and in the longer term, it will likely discourage younger teachers from choosing such a specialised vocation. All of this is to the detriment of our children. Recommendations:
 - Exempt teachers of the deaf (and teachers of other disability groups, such as teachers of the blind) from the mobility clause
 - If total exemption not possible, then at least double the amount of time a teacher can spend in their chosen specialised area before returning to the mainstream.
- Long term planning must provide for the “growth” of teachers of the deaf in the ACT to replace the current IHST when they retire. The scholarship program is a great incentive for teachers to do their Teacher of the Deaf Training but the mobility policy makes it rather pointless.

Mainstream Teachers

- Few mainstream teachers have much experience of teaching HI children, and have received little formal instruction in teaching children with special needs. Teachers can be and must be better prepared to support our children. Suggestions include:
 - Training workshops discussing the needs of HI children, different modes of communication, assistive listening devices and strategies for supporting HI children.
 - Provision of educational material, such as links to information sheets and/or websites.

Notetakers, AUSLAN interpreters and Learning Support Assistants

- Not enough teachers or STAs with relevant skill level to service the needs of students eg: signing interpreters or Itinerant Teachers with good Auslan skills
- The shortage of people with these qualifications could be addressed by improving their status and better recognising and rewarding their significant skills and expertise.

Full Access to Curriculum

- HI children must be given access to all areas of the mainstream curriculum. This principle applies equally to children in mainstream classes and those in unit settings.
- Specific examples:

- Children can miss key curriculum elements when withdrawn from class for one-on-one lessons. IHST and classroom teachers must have a plan to minimise the occurrence and/or impact of such withdrawal.
- The Road Ready Program is currently only available in high school, but this must be made available to children in college if it is more appropriate to their special needs.

SCAN Process

- There are some inequities in the SCAN assessment forms because some of the descriptors are inadequate for deaf/hearing impaired students.
- All of the appropriate people need to be at these meetings and have all of the relevant information. These meetings should be scheduled and advised to all parties well in advance to allow all parties to attend. It is totally unacceptable to exclude parents from the meetings due to poor organisation on the part of the convenors.
- SCAN meetings can be very overwhelming and intimidating for parents, especially the first one. Parents need to be encouraged to advocate for their child rather than being pressured by other people at the meeting to agree to something with which they don't fully agree. Parents also need to be prepared by the school for the emotional toll of these meetings.

Other issues:

- Some HI children are enrolled at schools outside their area because the schools in their area are unsuitable. This is sometimes the case for children with other disabilities as well. It can then be very difficult to enrol a sibling at the same school, placing considerable stress on the parents and children. We recommend a policy that ensures siblings can attend the same school as the disabled child.
- Some Deaf/Hearing Impaired students have other disabilities and parents are often forced to pick the primary disability when in fact both disabilities contribute equally to the student's capabilities. Support must be flexible enough to support the whole person, not just one part of the person.
- More interaction between Deaf/Hearing Impaired students on a term basis. In the past the IHST organised regular opportunities for HI children to get to know each other. This is especially important because children are mostly mainstreamed.
- Availability of therapy services in the school setting eg: Speech Therapy. Many years ago a speech therapist came to the unit at Weetangera 1 morning every fortnight. This was a very valuable service but ceased quite some time ago.
- Provision of free or low cost transport where disabled children need to travel to a school distant from their home in order to achieve good educational access.
- Provision of support to HI children in non-government schools: some parents would prefer their children to attend non-government schools but find that their HI children would not be supported by the IHST in those schools. This forces parents to make a very difficult choice between itinerant hearing support and a preferred educational setting.

These parents believe that children with special needs should have access to the same public funding and services regardless of the school.