

21 August, 2015

Dear Committee Members,

This submission has been prepared on behalf of the Dyslexia-SPELD Foundation in WA (DSF Literacy and Clinical Services) and AUSPELD (The Australian Federation of SPELD Associations).

The current inquiry focuses on an area of enormous significance to us as, sadly, there remains in the Australian school system, an incredible lack of understanding of the functional impact of learning disabilities and the steps that can – and should – be taken to minimise this impact.

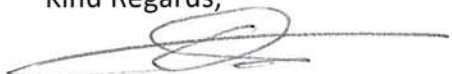
There are many students in Australian schools struggling to achieve at acceptable levels in key academic areas. Although there are many reasons underpinning this under-performance, for some the reason can be directly attributed to a learning disability. Depending on the student's circumstances this learning disability may, or may not, have been identified.

Students with learning disabilities have unexpected and persistent difficulties in specific areas of academic achievement as a result of an underlying neurodevelopmental disorder, the origin of which includes an interaction of genetic, cognitive and environmental factors. A defining feature of a learning disability is that it continues to exist, despite appropriate instruction and intervention.

The most frequently occurring learning disability is a reading disorder (commonly known as dyslexia), whereas written expression disorders (dysgraphia) and mathematics disorders (dyscalculia) occur less frequently. Academic research and evidence from practice suggests that the incidence of learning disabilities is approximately 3 – 5% of the student population, meaning that teachers are likely to work with at least one student with a learning disability in every class they teach.

I am more than happy to respond to further questions and would welcome the opportunity to present to the Committee at the public hearing scheduled to take place in Perth on the 4th of September, 2015.

Kind Regards,



Mandy Nayton

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Inquiry into current levels of access and attainment for students with disability in the school system, and the impact on students and families associated with inadequate levels of support (Education and Employment References Committee)

Terms of Reference

- a. **current levels of access and attainment for students with disability in the school system, and the impact on students and families associated with inadequate levels of support;**

Unfortunately, many students with learning disabilities are never identified, particularly those living in more disadvantaged areas or from disadvantaged families. It is our view that students with learning disabilities (or disorders) should be identified in line with the RTI (Response to Intervention) model. This specifies that schools should implement a three wave (or tier) approach to identifying, supporting and monitoring **all** students at risk of academic failure in the early years. Essentially this requires schools to provide high quality, evidence-based instruction for all students, with regular screening and curriculum-based assessment in place to ensure that children are progressing in line with age-related and curricula expectations (first wave). Students not progressing as expected – or progressing at an unusually slow rate – should be given access to more intensive (usually small group), targeted instruction delivered by well-trained teachers (second wave). Students who continue to struggle, despite this additional support (i.e. they do not respond as expected to intervention which has been ongoing for a reasonable period of time / e.g. six months) should have access to: more in-depth assessment; more targeted intervention (perhaps one-to-one); access to scaffolding and accommodations (including assistive technology if needed); and, frequently, an IEP or ILP (Individual Education Plan or Individual Learning Plan) (third wave). It is generally assumed, if the three-wave / RTI model is in place, that students with learning disabilities will be identified through assessment at the third wave of intervention.

This approach is considered to be more inclusive, and certainly more effective, than the current ‘wait to fail’ model (or the absence of any model at all) frequently adopted by Australian schools and education authorities. It is used successfully in many overseas countries and is enshrined in legislation (in terms of learning disability identification) in the United States. Finland – often held up as a highly successful education provider – ensures that all children have access to additional support from well-trained teachers in the event that they start to fall behind (in fact, one in eight teachers in the Finnish system is a support teacher). They, along with a number of other Scandinavian countries, view inclusivity as not simply a matter of ensuring **access to the curriculum** (which is in and of itself vitally important), but also a matter of ensuring that all students have **access to individually appropriate teaching and learning opportunities that will enable them to achieve at levels commensurate with their potential**. Unfortunately we are neither ensuring access to curriculum nor access to achievement.

Students who continue to struggle despite high quality early instruction and evidence-based intervention should have access to a comprehensive assessment (incorporating standardised cognitive and academic measures) that will assist in the identification of underlying causative factors but that will, more importantly, inform ongoing intervention and accommodations. The recently revised DSM 5 (the diagnostic manual used by most psychologists) outlines the assessment approach for specific learning disability diagnosis and incorporates as a central criterion the student's response to well-founded intervention.

Many students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, do not currently have access to appropriate assessment. The main reasons for this are:

- We do not currently have high quality early instruction and evidence-based intervention in many of our schools and, as a consequence, many students are failing to make adequate progress in the key academic areas. This means that – particularly in low SES schools where high numbers of students are performing poorly – the students with learning disabilities are not 'obvious'.
- Many school psychologists are discouraged from assessing and diagnosing students with learning disabilities, resulting in families either seeking assessments from psychologists in private practice or not accessing an assessment at all (as is frequently the case in families struggling financially).
- It is sometimes felt that there is little point in assessing a student for a possible learning disability as there is no tangible support provided even with a diagnosis.

In cases where students are identified with a learning disability, the response from schools varies significantly. Many schools suggest that they simply do not have the resources to provide support for students with learning disabilities. In low SES areas where there is often a high proportion of students struggling with literacy and numeracy difficulties, it is unlikely that students with learning disabilities will be singled out for support. (And, perhaps, neither should they. Essentially all students failing in literacy and numeracy should be better supported and, as a community, we should have higher aspirations for every Australian child – no matter what his or her circumstance. If we were able to raise standards generally it would become more likely that students with learning disabilities would receive the assistance they need.)

Obviously the impact of this inadequate response on families and students is enormous. Over the last 12 months DSF (WA) received over 27,000 requests for support and/or information from parents, teachers and allied health professionals. Other States and Territories report similar levels of contact. Many of the individuals contacting DSF are parents (or young adults) extremely distressed about the challenges they, or their children, are facing on a daily basis. Research tells us that in the first few years of schooling there are no single correlational factors that stand out in relation to motivation to attend school or behaviour problems in the classroom. By year 3 the single most significant correlational factor is reading ability – and this continues to be the case throughout primary school and secondary school.

Struggling to learn the fundamental skills of literacy and numeracy has a profound impact on children and adolescents as they progress through a system that: values these skills highly; judges their performance daily on tasks requiring these skills; but, that fails to either intervene appropriately to address their difficulties or to ensure that adequate measures are taken to provide alternative access and opportunity.

Essentially, very few students with learning disabilities are supported appropriately in Australian schools. They rarely have access to: early identification and assessment; effective evidence-based intervention; and/or, individually targeted accommodations / adjustments designed to provide access to the curriculum or to demonstrate knowledge, skills and understandings. **This has a measurable impact on their levels of attainment, their emotional well-being and places a significant burden – both emotional and financial - on their families.**

b. the social, economic and personal benefits of improving outcomes for students with disability at school and in further education and employment;

There is no question that improving outcomes for all students with poor literacy and numeracy in the Australian school system should be a matter of urgency. The fact that the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data shows that 52% of 15 to 19 year olds do not have the literacy skills necessary to work in a modern workplace and that the recent Industry Skills Council's report *'No More Excuses' (an industry response to the language, literacy and numeracy challenge)* found that the literacy and numeracy tasks required in work or personal environments are frequently beyond the skill level of 46% of Australian adults in literacy, and 53% of Australian adults in numeracy, should be of massive concern to everyone working in the education system. There is no doubt that we should be taking steps to address this.

Obviously these statistics represent millions of individual Australian stories (many of them potentially distressing) and only some of them are likely to be individuals with learning disabilities. **All** students need access to better instruction and more support if they do not make progress in the early years of schooling. Evidence from both research and practice strongly suggests that we can reduce the number of students struggling with persistent and enduring problems in literacy and numeracy to well under 10%. This in itself would result in immeasurable benefits to the Australian economy and to our society. It would also reduce the number of students presenting with ongoing, persistent difficulties in literacy and numeracy and therefore reduce the number of students requiring higher levels of intervention and support. The students who do require this additional intervention and support (approximately 3 – 5%) are frequently the students in our schools with learning disabilities (often undiagnosed). If we are able to assist these students more effectively the social, economic and personal benefits will be significant. More students will: successfully complete year 12; proceed beyond school into further education; secure long-term employment; and, become financially secure. In addition, fewer students will: drop

out of school early; become unemployed; commit crimes; and, experience poor long-term mental and physical health outcomes. These statistics are all well-documented and have been reported in many national and international reports as well as highly credible research.

It is essential that we improve access to: high quality early literacy and numeracy instruction for all students; evidence-based intervention for students who fall behind their peers; **targeted assessment for students with persistent difficulties; and, appropriate accommodations (including assistive technology) for students with learning disabilities** (those students who fail to respond to intensive intervention). **These measures will improve outcomes for students with learning disabilities at school and in further education and employment.**

- c. the impact on policies and the education practice of individual education sectors as a result of the More Support for Students with Disabilities program, and the impact of the cessation of this program in 2014 on schools and students;

The MSSD program provided funding to States and Territories specifically to improve outcomes for students in the Australian school system with disability. The key objective of the MSSD initiative was to

.... strengthen the capacity and expertise of Australian schools and teachers to provide additional support to students with disabilities, contributing to improvements in their learning experiences, educational outcomes and transitions to further education and work.

Of the 12 specified MSSD Outputs, the two most cited in relation to students with learning disabilities were Output 5 ('Providing training for pre-service and/or practicing teachers to build their skills in special education.') and Output 6 ('Providing training for all school staff to improve understanding of their obligations under the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* and how to meet those obligations.') A substantial proportion of funding linked to achieving Outcome 5 in most States and Territories was allocated to the purchase of OLT (On-Line Training) annual licences specifically through OLT (Australia). OLT is a UK-based company that has developed a range of on-line courses for the UK market. These have been modified to suit the needs of Australian classrooms and have been rolled out nationally across many Government and Non-Government jurisdictions at the cost of many millions of dollars annually. This roll out was driven strongly (at least initially) by OLT / DEC personnel in NSW. The two on-line courses dealing (to some extent) with learning disabilities are '*Understanding Dyslexia and Significant Difficulties in Reading*' and '*Personalised Learning*.' In both courses there is an emphasis on awareness raising, background knowledge and recommended strategies. The

Dyslexia and Reading Difficulties course draws heavily on the UK Rose Report (2009) and provides a solid coverage of current evidence from both research and practice in this field. It contains a great deal of useful and up-to-date content that – although freely available elsewhere – has been successfully synthesised in an accessible, user-friendly format. The *Personalised Learning* course has been designed (very recently) to examine the diversity in Australian schools and to consider the legal and professional responsibilities that schools and teachers have in terms of the inclusion and response to students with disability. The course covers the development of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and the use of evidence-based teaching strategies and adjustments. It can be viewed as aiming to meet the expectations associated with Output 6 of the MSSD initiative.

A number of education authorities also committed MSSD funding to the development, by the University of Canberra, of a series of online learning resources to raise awareness and understanding of the *Disability Discrimination Act (DDA)* and the *Education Standards (2005)*. This initiative was also linked directly to the MSSD's Output 6. We have not seen any outcome data associated with this initiative but reports from a number of schools with access to the resources suggest that the material is useful.

It is difficult to determine whether the money spent to date on OLT (and the University of Canberra) programs represents value for money and whether – given that the MSSD funding is no longer available – access to the courses will remain available (the annual licences are expensive). Until recently there was very little information on the outcomes achieved through participation in the on-line courses apart from the reported statistic that a reasonably high percentage of teachers enrolling in one course were found to enrol in additional on-line courses. In May of this year, internal data from pre and post-course evaluations was made available and this data suggested: an overall increase in teacher knowledge and understanding (of dyslexia and other reading difficulties); an improvement in the assessment skills of participating teachers; an improved capacity of participating teachers to meet individual student needs; and, an improvement in the skills of participating teachers to plan and implement interventions for students identified with dyslexia and other reading difficulties. The *Personalised Learning* course has only recently been developed and therefore does not have collated feedback.

Although the OLT courses appear to be well-developed and potentially meet a significant need, it is important to note that the data available is all drawn from OLT's own sources (and they obviously have a commercial interest in the resources). The available information is based on the self-evaluations of participating teachers, and does not relate specifically to actual student outcomes. As a consequence, it

may be prudent to gather at least some independent evidence before committing significant amounts of ongoing funding to this particular company / approach.

In order to meet the need for affordable, reliable, evidence-based information on learning disability identification, intervention and support, DSF has developed a practical resource for schools and allied health professionals. This resource is being distributed via the AUSPELD network and through ACER (Australian Council of Educational Research). The *'Understanding Learning Difficulties – A practical guide'* is a comprehensive booklet and CD containing a wealth of information and a huge number of strategies designed to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities in Australian primary and secondary classrooms. The information can be shared across whole school communities and feedback from schools using the Guide has been overwhelmingly positive. It combines well with the OLT course or can be used as a stand-alone resource.

A second booklet, *'Understanding Learning Difficulties – A guide for parents'*, has recently been developed by DSF and is also being distributed by AUSPELD and ACER. The detailed booklet provides parents with important information about learning disabilities and the role they can play in supporting their child and their child's school.

A copy of each of these booklets has been provided to the Committee by way of information.

The MSSD program provided an important opportunity for schools and education authorities to offer teachers access to a range of targeted on-line courses and resources. Feedback suggests that this has resulted in increased knowledge and skills for the teachers who have participated in the training or who have been given access to the resources. Without ongoing funding, it is likely that the initial gains achieved through access to training and resources will be lost. **The *'Understanding Learning Difficulties – A practical guide'* and the *'Understanding Learning Difficulties – A guide for parents'* are examples of the type of resource needed in all schools.**

- d. the future impact on students with disability as a result of the Government's decision to index funding for schools at the consumer price index after 2017;

AUSPELD, through its State-based SPELD members, works closely with State and Territory departments of education to deliver training, advice and support to schools throughout Australia. From our experience, whenever funding for schools is reduced, it is often the specific programs and resources introduced to support students with additional educational needs that are amongst the first to be cut.

The most recent consumer price index figures released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics reveal that CPI increases for schooling have been far higher than price rises in many other sectors – and certainly well above CPI. Specifically the figures show that whereas CPI rose by only 1.3 per cent in the year to March, education costs rose by 5.4 per cent. This is clearly a significant difference and would represent a very real cut to education funding.

In the event that after 2017 funding for schools is indexed at the consumer price index, there is a strong likelihood that programs designed to support students with learning disabilities will be negatively impacted.

e. the progress of the implementation of the needs-based funding system as stated in the Australian Education Act;

It is the position of AUSPELD that students with learning disabilities should be supported in response to individual need and specifically in relation to levels of functional impact. Essentially this should result in better access to: early identification and assessment; effective evidence-based intervention, and, appropriate accommodations for those students who continue to struggle to participate on the same basis as their peers.

In many Australian schools this is simply not occurring and the response to parents requesting additional support (for their child/ren) is that the schools do not have sufficient resources to meet the identified need. Students with learning disabilities frequently struggle to access the curriculum (e.g. a student with a severe reading disorder, such as dyslexia, will have difficulty reading texts in any given subject area) or demonstrate their knowledge, skills and understanding (e.g. a student with a written expression disorder, such as dysgraphia, will have difficulty writing essays or responding to formal assessment tasks under timed conditions).

In cases where the functional impact of a learning disability is significant, students are entitled to the consideration and support outlined in both the DDA (Disability Discrimination Act) and the Education Standards (2005). Unfortunately, in the vast majority of cases, these students are neither having their needs identified nor having them met. The most commonly cited reason for this is a **lack of funding**. Schools will also point to the fact that learning disabilities do not attract individual funding and as a result there is no funding available to purchase resources or pay for specialist teachers.

In many overseas countries it is standard practice to ensure that **all** text books and course materials are available electronically to students with print disabilities (including students with learning disabilities). It is also standard practice to ensure that students with learning disabilities are given access to technology – and taught how to use this technology successfully – that will enable them to better demonstrate their knowledge and skills (e.g. voice to text / predictive writing tools / etc.)

If a needs-based system of funding was operational and being applied to students with learning disabilities then funds would be available for individual students at the second and third stages of a three wave model. Specifically, this would include funding for small-group or one-to-one evidence-based remediation (delivered by well-trained instructors) for students failing to achieve academically and appropriate accommodations for students with persistent and enduring difficulties (e.g. assistive technology – both software and hardware).

There is little evidence that the implementation of the needs-based funding system is progressing to the extent that it is resulting in tangible improvements for students with learning disabilities. The need for intensive, targeted intervention in primary and secondary schools, as well as appropriate accommodations (such as access to assistive technology) in upper-primary and secondary school classrooms, remains a very high priority.

- f. the progress of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability and the findings, recommendations and outcomes from this process, and how this data will, or should, be used to develop a needs-based funding system for students with disability;

In 2010, an Expert Advisory Group (in response to an agreement reached by the Council of Australian Governments – COAG) developed a model for collecting nationally consistent data on students with disability and the level of adjustment provided for them. All states and territories agreed to a trial of this model and the collection of data during the 2011 school year. **Students with identified learning disabilities were included in this trial.** The information collected included data relating to the level of adjustment provided, on an individual basis, to ensure access and participation. These levels were identified as being consistent with one of four categories: no adjustments; supplementary adjustments; substantial adjustments; and, extensive adjustments. **In the majority of cases, students with learning disabilities were provided with either no adjustments or supplementary adjustments;** although feedback from schools suggests that in cases where no adjustments were provided it was frequently due to a lack of available resources rather than as a consequence of a deliberate choice being made.

The need to ascertain the numbers of students with disability in the Australian school system became a greater priority when the recommendation was made (Review of Funding for Schooling, 2011) to introduce additional funding to schools in the form of a loading for all Australian school students with a disability. Before committing to an amount for each student (dependent on the level of functional impact) it was thought important to clarify (through the NCCD) how many students would be eligible for such a loading.

The review committee were strongly of the view that this should be addressed urgently, prior to any new arrangements being finalised. It was felt that collecting

more extensive and accurate data on both the incidence of disability in Australian schools, and the level and cost of educational adjustment required, would provide a good basis to inform the development of future funding arrangements for students with disability.

At this stage, there is little evidence to suggest that the NCCD has resulted in any specific changes to the level of support provided to students with learning disabilities in Australian schools. Some of the schools involved in the trials (2015 is the first year that all schools will be involved) have reported that the data collection has been useful and has resulted in them identifying and supporting some students that they may not have identified previously. On the other hand, it has been reported that some schools view the broad category of differentiated teaching as a 'reasonable adjustment' for the majority of students with learning disabilities and that there remains a strong view that there are insufficient resources (both human and physical) available to respond to ongoing need appropriately.

It is hoped that the data collected through the NCCD process will highlight the many students with learning disabilities (in Australian schools) not being adequately supported. Unfortunately, there are strong concerns held by many in the learning disability community – including families, teachers and allied health professionals – that very little change (in terms of funding and resource allocation) will eventuate.

- g. [how possible changes as a result of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability will be informed by evidence-based best practice of inclusion of students with disability;](#)

There is certainly some anecdotal evidence to suggest that the process of identifying students with disability (including students with learning disabilities) and reviewing the response provided by the school, as currently occurs as a component of the NCCD process, may assist schools to develop more inclusive policies and practices.

In some jurisdictions efforts have been made to introduce a three wave model in selected schools to determine whether this approach would result in better outcomes for all students and more targeted intervention for students at educational risk (including students with learning disabilities).

The ACT Department of Education and Training, in response to recommendations from their Taskforce on Students with Learning Difficulties, conducted a number of pilot studies examining both the correlation between measures of achievement used to assess student outcomes and the impact of introducing a three-wave (RTI / Response to Intervention) model in a number of low-achieving schools. The results were very positive.

Evidence suggests that introducing a three wave model of assessment and support provides us with the best chance of both improving academic standards across the

board, and monitoring and supporting students with learning disabilities (diagnosed and undiagnosed), assuming it is adhered to with fidelity.

If the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) results in more schools introducing a three wave model consisting of: high quality early instruction (including screening); targeted, intensive, evidence-based intervention for students falling behind; and, assessment, remediation and appropriate accommodations for those students who continue to struggle (despite intervention), then we can be confident that they have been informed by evidence-based best practice of inclusion of students with disability.

h. what should be done to better support students with disability in our schools;

This term of reference has been addressed in all sections of the submission however, in terms of creating a school environment that is inclusive and supportive of students with learning disabilities, the following points are important:

Schools can be considered to be learning-disability friendly if they:

- Recognise the effect of Learning Disability on student achievement and wellbeing.
- Actively improve the support of students with learning disabilities within the school.
- Value the professional knowledge of teachers and support staff through a commitment to the provision of ongoing professional learning opportunities in the areas of learning disability, as well as literacy and numeracy.
- Develop policies and practices to ensure that students with learning disabilities receive high quality teaching and appropriate intervention and accommodation.
- Implement and ensure adherence to such policies.
- Recognise that, within the Learning Disability-Friendly School, everyone has a role. These roles must be resourced and supported appropriately.

i. the early education of children with disability; and

As has been discussed on a number of occasions in this submission, the early identification and support of children at risk of literacy and numeracy failure is vitally important.

Early intervention is quite rightly heralded as the best approach to improving long-term outcomes for children experiencing difficulties with literacy and numeracy acquisition. Successful intervention for students with **both learning difficulties and learning disabilities** is thought to include a number of features, including:

Timely intervention:

The Response-to-Intervention (RTI) approach to meeting the needs of students with learning difficulties and disabilities outlines the need for differing levels of intervention to be implemented at the most critical times in a child's development. The three 'waves' of intervention can be differentiated by the level of intensity, duration and type of instruction. The first wave incorporates high quality, evidence based classroom teaching for all students. Such an approach is effective for the majority of children in the early years. However, some children will be identified as unable to acquire literacy and/or numeracy skills effectively through classroom instruction alone.

Second wave interventions should be provided as soon as possible after the child has been identified with experiencing difficulties that cannot be effectively addressed by the classroom teacher. It is critically important to respond to these difficulties early before ineffective strategies become well-developed and failure becomes entrenched. Research indicates that students benefit most when: quality instruction is provided to **all** students; and, **preventative** strategies are implemented in the Foundation year for students at-risk. This will increase the success of intervention in Years 1 and 2. Research evidence demonstrates that when intervention is provided between the second half of the Foundation year through to the end of Year 2, the majority of at-risk students are able to catch-up and remain within the average range for literacy and numeracy development.

A focus on explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics and fluency in the early years as well as extensive instruction in vocabulary and comprehension (for literacy instruction):

A number of large-scale reviews conducted internationally have provided clear evidence indicating what an effective early reading program must include. The National Reading Panel review in the USA (NICHHD, 2000), the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (DEST, 2005), and the Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading all reported that the key components of an early reading program include: phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, text reading, vocabulary and comprehension.

Explicit and systematic instruction:

Research consistently finds that effective early skill development in both literacy and numeracy should be delivered explicitly and systematically. "**Explicit**" refers to the need for clear and direct presentation of the concepts, skills and understandings within the instructional program. Content is presented in small steps and students are supported through practice items before they are moved on to apply the knowledge or skills independently. Monitoring of student progress is important. "**Systematic**" relates to the need to have a pre-planned, cumulative and structured scope and sequence in the concepts and skills taught.

Teachers and teacher assistants must be well-trained:

Research evidence indicates that trained professional educators are most successful in implementing literacy and numeracy interventions, however, paraprofessionals (e.g. education assistants) can achieve similar results if they are well-trained. All educators working with children at risk require training in instructional methods which are structured and explicit. Furthermore, teachers and education assistants need to be skilled in optimising instructional time, maximising student participation, building student motivation and group management strategies.

The early identification and support of all students at risk of literacy and numeracy failure – including children with possible learning disabilities - is vitally important. The whole-school approach currently recommended in most of the research literature is the RTI or three-wave model. There is also strong evidence from practice that this model has the greatest likelihood of improving academic outcomes and ensuring more targeted support for students with learning disabilities.

j. **Any other related matters.**

Thank you for this opportunity!