



## **South Pacific Educators in Vision Impairment**

[www.spevi.net](http://www.spevi.net)

## **SPEVI response to the 2020 review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005**

We acknowledge and honour the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waterways on the lands on which we live and work, and pay our respects to elders past, present and future.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this document is to provide a SPEVI response to the 2020 review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005.

### **Who we are**

The South Pacific Educators in Vision Impairment (SPEVI) is a professional body whose specialty is in matters pertaining to the education of persons with vision impairment (VI) in Australia, New Zealand, and Pacific Island Countries. SPEVI membership includes Specialist Teachers (Vision Impairment), education administrators, eye health and allied health professionals, orientation and mobility specialists, technology developers and consultants, and parents and caregivers.

SPEVI promotes educational systems in which diversity is valued and disability is not viewed as a characteristic by which to judge a person's worth. SPEVI members advocate for the rights of all students with vision impairment to equitable access to inclusive quality education.

### **Background**

Vision impairment is a low incidence disability and varies greatly in severity and impact on each individual student's access, participation and achievement in education. Education systems are designed for those who can see, and as a result, students with vision impairment require individualised accommodations and adjustments in order to equitably access the curriculum and learn alongside their sighted peers, without discrimination or disadvantage. The essential role of Australian Specialist Teachers (Vision Impairment) is to provide quality support for students with vision impairment, their teachers and families, in accordance with federal and state/territory anti-discrimination legislation, policies and standards.

## **2020 review of the Disability Standards for Education (DSE) 2005**

This SPEVI response to the 2020 DSE review refers specifically to students with vision impairment, including students with blindness, low vision, deafblindness, or vision impairment plus additional disabilities. The SPEVI response is a synthesis of responses compiled during online SPEVI Community of Practice meetings, together with communication with individual members.

### **Supporting students**

How have you appropriately supported students with disability during their education? This includes the student being able to access supports, including specialist resources.

Across Australia's states and territories, Specialist Teachers (Vision Impairment) are integral members of educational teams supporting individual students with vision impairment, working collaboratively with school staff, other professionals and families within preschool and school settings. Specialist Teachers (VI) are employed by government and non-government education systems and blindness organisations, and provide direct or indirect teaching and support in inclusive mainstream schools, specialist settings, or via telepractice.

Specialist Teachers (Vision Impairment) generally hold post-graduate qualifications in disability, specialising in vision impairment education. They apply their knowledge of the physical, social and cognitive implications of low vision and blindness to the development or selection of teaching strategies, activities and resources for individual students with VI. Their role includes sharing knowledge and skills in the development of accessible materials and learning environments, and teaching a range of vision-specific skills that promote personal agency and independence. These vision-specific skills are referred to as the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC), and address experiences and concepts that are casually or incidentally learned by sighted students that need to be systematically and sequentially taught to learners with vision impairment.

Specialist Teachers (VI) support students in the following nine areas of the Expanded Core Curriculum:

- Technology, including mainstream and assistive technology and optical devices,
- Compensatory skills, such as braille and handwriting skills,
- Sensory efficiency, including tactile, auditory or visual perceptual skills,
- Orientation and mobility, including safe and efficient travel between home and school,
- Social interaction skills, which are predictors of personal life and future employment,
- Career education, including types of careers and specific skills required,
- Recreation and leisure skills, including what recreation options are available and how to access them safely,

- Independent living skills, such as cooking, dressing and organisational skills, and
- Self-determination and empowerment skills, including self-advocacy, problem solving and independent responsibility.

SPEVI members have indicated that the variability in quality and quantity of services and programs for students with vision impairment across Australia's states and territories directly impacts on the students' educational outcomes. Variability can be found in (i) education sector policies and standards, (ii) funding provision for optical and assistive devices, technology and alternative formats (braille, large print, digital, audio), (iii) levels of student access to specialist teaching support due to geographical location (urban, rural, remote), and (iv) attitudes, policies and practices of school leaders and staff.

In some contexts, SPEVI members must advocate strongly for the provision of services and equipment that are assessed to be essential for educational success of individual students with vision impairment.

SPEVI members provided the following examples of appropriate supports for students with vision impairment during their education:

Plans and Profiles:

- Individual Curriculum Plan
- Individual Education Plan
- Individual Student Support Plan
- Personalised Learning Plan
- Classroom Level Support Plan
- Individual Student Support Plans for all students
- Communication Profile
- Learning Media Profile

Education and therapy supports:

- Specialist Teacher (VI)
- Speech and Language Pathologist, Occupational Therapist (OT), Physiotherapist
- Adjustments and accommodations to the Australian curriculum, pedagogy and/or learning environment
- Adjustments and accommodations for health and personal care, safety, social emotional wellbeing, or communication
- Individualised English and Mathematics goals created and progressed each semester
- For students with deafblindness, use of a Mini Mic synced to cochlear implants
- Alternative Augmentative Communication (AAC) systems (e.g. Proloquo2Go)
- Roadmap of Communicative Competence (ROCC) for students with communication challenges

- Multi-sensory room for students with severe disabilities
- “Engine room” for students requiring emotion regulation and/or physical movement supports.

## Transitions

Tell us about your experience assisting a student with disability to transition from one education sector to another; for example, from school to further education.

Transitions between preschool and school, and school to post-school educational sectors are multi-faceted and a major consideration for students with VI and their parents or caregivers.

SPEVI members have reported the following experiences when assisting students with vision impairment to transition from one education sector to another:

- Emphasis on development of student’s social skills and problem solving skills in order to establish new friendships and a sense of belonging in the new school community.
- Emphasis on supporting students to orientate themselves to the new physical environment and independently managing home to school transport options.
- Collaboration and support for classroom teachers and teacher assistants in learning how to create accessible books and learning materials, and inclusive teaching strategies. This support includes provision of training sessions during student-free days or staff meetings.
- Participation in transition or education teams, together with the transitioning student and family, key school staff and supporting organisations.
- Advocating for parents and caregivers to be included as equal partners in the transition process, to ensure a holistic, “team around the child” approach in which a clear understanding of the capabilities and needs of the individual student are communicated to staff in the new educational setting.
- Emphasis on proactive, student-centred approaches to transition, although this year such approaches have been hindered by COVID-19 restrictions.
- **Early childhood to school transitions**
- One SPEVI member contributed the following example of the early childhood to school transition processes offered by her specialist school for students with disabilities and their families:
- Students entering the school system undergo the following induction process: School tour with Deputy Principal; Leading teacher liaises with any previous professionals (e.g. preschool teacher, speech pathologist, OT, early childhood learning or intervention centre staff); Guidance officer and classroom teacher undertake verification of intellectual disability for all students when first attending the

specialist school; with additional verifications for hearing or vision impairment in collaboration with specialists in the respective fields.

### **Secondary to post-secondary educations**

SPEVI members emphasised the most problematic transition being from secondary to tertiary education, due to the cessation of Specialist Teacher (VI) support at the end of secondary schooling. SPEVI members highlighted the following reasons:

- Students with VI must be independent learners by the end of Year 12, as they will be expected to independently undertake their own research, library searches and note-taking, and independently access and participate in on-campus and online lectures and tutorials in higher education settings.
- Students may experience access issues because of different Learning Management systems and their incompatibility with screen reader or electronic braille access.
- Students with VI must adapt to the teaching approaches of individual academics and tutors, and find work-arounds for any limitations in access to course texts and library resources in their preferred format (braille, large print, digital).

**School to work transitions:** It was noted by SPEVI members there are limited opportunities for young people with a disability transitioning to the workforce.

### **COVID-19**

COVID-19: Has COVID-19 impacted the experience of your students with disability in participating in education? Have their experiences ever been impacted by other major events, such as natural disasters?

Note: The following SPEVI member contributions reflect the different levels of lockdown across Australia's states and territories.

Online learning has presented both opportunities and challenges for different students with VI. For some students, working online has increased access and participation. In traditional classrooms, the majority of work is visual, displayed on a whiteboard or classroom noticeboards, and to be completed within the time constraints of specific lessons. For students with VI who are skilled in the independent use of technology, the combination of home-based online learning, accessible curriculum content, and more flexible work completion times, enable students to participate in education and meet curriculum outcomes. In these instances, teachers and parents have reported that students with vision impairment have effective access to online learning activities and resources.

However, in situations where schools have hurriedly transitioned from school to home education delivery in accordance with government and health authority requirements, schools have had to quickly adapt to online learning with no training for school staff or time to review the accessibility levels of online platforms. Communication between specialist

and class teachers was limited during the rapidly changing school contexts, and the provision of accessible learning materials for individual students was overlooked. Examples of inaccessible online materials for students with VI include scanned pictures, maps and diagrams with no provision of alternative text (Alt Text) descriptions. Educational resources that are scanned and saved as pictures are not accessible to students using screen readers or electronic braille notetakers. Some apps and programs selected by schools for information sharing are also not accessible, or only certain elements are accessible.

SPEVI members reported substantial variability in the quality of education for students with VI across Australian states and territories, education systems (public, independent, religious), geographical locations (urban, rural, remote), and across individual schools. SPEVI members raised concerns about the adequacy of individual home set-ups for students with VI, and the accessibility levels of home-school communication and assigned work. Variability was noted in the following areas: (i) quality of home lighting for students who experience glare or contrast sensitivity, (ii) limitations in access to required equipment or assistive devices used in school, (iii) family ability to provide non-optical aides such as ergonomic chairs and reading stands that promote correct posture and reduce physical or visual fatigue, (iv) the level of student skills to independently make adjustments to their home learning environment or the school work sent home by teachers, and (v) the level of parent knowledge of their children's access technology or braille literacy abilities and needs.

Some Specialist Teachers (VI) reported having limited access to students during home lockdown and as a result, could not provide these students with sufficient support. This contrasts with Specialist Teachers (VI) who were able to directly access the students on their caseloads and their families.

Online programs such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams were found to be accessible for students with vision impairment and proved to be valuable methods of home-school communication. However, some online platforms used by schools were less accessible and contributed to student and parent frustration and stress.

It was reported that some students who had experienced bush fires prior to the COVID-19 pandemic were unsettled, aggressive, or had inappropriate behaviours at home. There are also concerns about the impact of frequent hand sanitiser use on the effectiveness of fingers reading braille, and anxiety caused by the inability of students to maintain the required social distance without sufficient sight, or to safely request human guide assistance without fear of COVID infection.

The following six individual SPEVI member contributions reflect the different experiences of COVID-19 across Australia:

1. COVID-19 has impacted my students' learning and their family routines. All my students accessed the Supported Home Learning program. This program was done through my daily phone conversations with parents, explaining the lessons and directing the parents on how to teach their children with VI. Many of my families said that the break of routine has unsettled their children, and some parents asked for assistance to manage their children's behaviour at home.
2. The bush fires and floods have affected some of my students as they were unable to attend school for several days or up to a week.
3. COVID-19 impacted the learning of my students. Half of my students participated in the learning-from-home program and the other half continued their learning on-site at school. For those at school, anxiety was high. Their routines were not the same and many activities, such as assembly and swimming, were no longer happening. They were wondering when their friends were coming back to school. Many students were worried about catching COVID-19. High levels of anxiety are not conducive to learning. The zones of regulation, social stories and explicit teaching helped to alleviate some of their anxiety.
4. Students learning from home had their own challenges, but I am very thankful to the parents for putting time and effort into educating their children and working together with the school. Daily guidance was provided to parents and resources were sent home. Daily telephone conversations were provided to discuss the challenges and highlights of the students learning.
5. At school, as specialist teachers we check on posture, lighting, use of slope boards, etc. Using Zoom, we found that the work-spaces for the students were not set up properly at home.
6. COVID-19 was challenging for all the students, regardless of their background and personal settings. However, the students in my class were exposed to a different style of home-based learning wherein their parents took over the role as both teacher and classmate. Parents were supported in this with daily lesson plans for both English and Mathematics, as well as a once a week Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS) lessons. Parents were also supported through daily phone calls to check in with how they and their child were going (both emotionally and educationally). Also sent home were resource packs with materials to be used throughout the home learning experience. From parent feedback I received, I believe that whilst my students did have access to educational tools and activities, they did not receive a holistic learning environment.

## Access and participation

Do you think the Standards help students with disability to access and participate in education and training on the same basis as students without disability? Why, or why not?

The Standards are guiding teachers and other school staff towards creating more inclusive learning environments for all students. The Standards serve as a framework for how disability-focused education should take place, but lack in providing explicit examples and thorough explanations of how to best cater for students with diverse learning needs. Explicit examples are needed of what the Standards look like within the classroom context. And how curriculum access for individual students should be created.

Whilst many SPEVI members believe that the Disability Standards for Education are useful for awareness raising and advocating for disability-specific accommodations and adjustments to curriculum, pedagogy and learning environments, the following specific concerns were raised:

- Awareness – not all parents and caregivers are aware of the Standards.
- Understanding - not all teachers and parents understand the Standards as a whole, and there is no plain English version.
- Interpretation - terms such as reasonable adjustments and financial hardship may not be interpreted correctly.
- Training – not all States/territories and education sectors provide mandatory initial or yearly training in the Standards for regular and specialist teachers.
- Accountability – who is responsible for making reasonable adjustments?
- Auditing – who is ensuring reasonable adjustments are being made?

Presented below are individual contributions that offer additional insights:

- In our school setting (specialist school), the Standards are valuable for both teachers and students with disabilities. The Standards direct us to follow guidelines and apply the appropriate pathways to make sure all students are accessing specialised education. We make adjustments that are specific to the student, in consultation with the student's parents or carers, specialists and doctors. The Standards clarify the rights and responsibilities to be applied to students with disabilities accessing education.
- Yes, the Standards do help students with disabilities access education, as education providers have an obligation to make adjustments for students with disabilities. Under the Standards, the educator has to make adjustments that are specific to the student in consultation with the student's parents or carers. The Standards clarify the rights and responsibilities in relation to students with disabilities accessing education. The problem is that not many people seem to be

aware of the Standards and if they know of them, are not familiar with the content. This is when the Standards do not help students with disabilities. If educators are not aware of the Standards and what the Standards consist of, then students will not reap the benefits of them. Standards should be discussed more in schools to make sure all educators are familiar with the content and how to apply the guidelines/pathways.

How do you think the Standards could be improved to help overcome barriers for students with disability in accessing or participating in education?

### **Awareness**

- I. Along with mandatory yearly training in the content of the Standards, all schools should offer professional development in how to enact the Standards.
- II. Parents and caregivers should be made aware of the Standards prior to their children entering school, including the obligations of the schools and the rights of children and families.
  - The Standards should be made available in Plain English and accessible formats (braille, large print, digital). Provision of an easy-to-read version of the Standards would be beneficial for families where a parent presents with an intellectual disability or low literacy levels in the English language.

### **Interpretation of terms**

- I. The terms 'reasonable adjustments' and 'hardship' are interpreted differently by school and education sector leaders and decision makers, creating differences in provision of support. Case studies or guidelines could assist.

### **Accountability**

- I. Education sector accountability could be enacted by implementing nationally consistent collection of data and school audits on a regular basis. Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems should be to ensure the required adjustments for individual students are implemented by schools.
- II. Documents addressing educator accountability need to be made clear for school leaders, teachers and ancillary staff.

### **Implementation**

- I. Differences in school implementation of the Standards could be addressed by linking with Standards with federal and/or state/territory legislation. A stronger "legislative footprint" is needed to ensure schools meet the expectations set out in the Standards.

- II. The Standards should include a requirement that all schools establish education teams of relevant stakeholders to prepare and regularly review individual education or curriculum plans (IEPs or ICPs) for individual students with a disability.

### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with disability**

What would you change to make the Standards work better for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with disability and their families and carers?

The following responses are offered by individual SPEVI members:

- Guidelines are needed on how to better support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) students with blindness, low vision, deafblindness, or other disability. Emphasis should be placed on the particular cultural contexts within such guidelines, for example, students from ATSI background, and students from other cultural or ethnic groups.
- Clear communication about the Standards with ATSI families is to be improved.
- Educators need to be encouraged to apply the Standards equally for all families in the school community, with respect and appreciation shown for the diversity of families.
- Educators should familiarise themselves with the supports available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, including where to find and how to access specialised supports.
- The DSE review process should include liaison with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders to hear the issues and problems experienced by families and their children disabilities. SMART goals should be set to address any issues and recommendations raised by the elders.
- Comprehensive professional learning should be provided in how the Standards intersect with Indigenous history and culture.

SPEVI members recommend that the 2020 review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005 investigate the positive impact of the Marrung 10-Year Education Plan (2016-2026), developed by the Department of Education and Training Victoria in partnership with the Victorian Aboriginal community. The Marrung Plan communicates the DET commitment to building genuine partnerships with Koorie learners and communities to support self-determination.

SPEVI members also recommend that the 2020 review of the DSE 2005 consider the centrality of the Treaty of Waitangi to the cultural sensitivity in education service and program delivery in New Zealand, and how the Treaty underpins education provision for Maori children. The Treaty of Waitangi is a founding document of New Zealand and was first signed in 1840 by representatives of the British Crown and Maori chiefs.

We appreciate the opportunity to submit to the review.