



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION  
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## Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into access to services  
and information in Auslan

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## Introduction

The National Association of Australian Teachers of the Deaf, known as NAATD, has been a professional body for Teachers of the Deaf since 1935. The NAATD has been approached by Andrew McIntyre, Committee Secretary at the Office of the Legislative Assembly in the ACT to respond to an inquiry into access to services and information in Auslan in the ACT.

We currently represent over 300 Teachers of the Deaf throughout Australia and potentially we could include all Teachers of the Deaf within Australia.

The role of the Teacher of the Deaf varies throughout Australia and internationally – however the focus of our role is to work with and support the education of children who are deaf and their families. As an association our goals include the ability to encourage Governments to improve services and allocate appropriate resources to the education of children and students who are deaf. NAATD has actively pursued this through contributions made to various federal and state government working parties, provision of feedback to government initiatives and membership of various committees.

Considering these aims the focus of our submission relates to points one and two in the Terms of Reference, with specific reference to the effects on children and their families in relation to the education and training settings.

Inquiry into access to services and information in Auslan, with reference to :

1. The disadvantage and discrimination faced by Deaf people due to lack of access to services and information in Auslan.
2. Options to strengthen and enforce legislation and policy to increase provision of services and information in Auslan across the public and private sectors in the following education setting.

## Background

Between one and two children in every thousand is born with permanent hearing loss in Australia. By school age, between two and three children in every thousand are identified with a permanent hearing loss and are fitted with listening devices such as hearing aids or cochlear implants (Ching, Leigh & Dillon, 2013). Despite ongoing advances in audiological technology, permanent childhood deafness continues to impact significantly on the ability of students to access the school curriculum on the same basis as their hearing peers.

More than 90 percent of deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) children are born to hearing parents, most of whom have had minimal experience with supporting the language development of a DHH child (Blamey et al., 2001; Leigh, 2007; Pisoni, 2007). Indeed, parents and caregivers may never have had to consider how language is learned because typically developing children acquire language seemingly effortlessly without the need for any intervention. Access to incidental learning in school and family contexts by DHH children is often restricted because of difficulties in communication and the limitations of access to auditory information (Brown & Cornes, 2015). DHH students are also challenged when competing sensory input in their learning environments interrupts their focus on auditory, visual or contextual information and they are frequently unaware of information they have missed.

## Key Points

Many DHH children commence school without a strong language base in their first language and struggle to adequately access the national curriculum because they are being taught in a language they are still in the process of learning. In many cases, it is a challenging task for parents and educators to understand the learning potential of DHH children and to acquire competence in accommodating the children's communication needs. It is important to acknowledge that, even though a DHH student may have intelligible speech and is a confident communicator, there may be underlying linguistic difficulties and reduced literacy skills that limit their access to the curriculum.

Over 80 percent of DHH students in Australia attend regular classes in mainstream schools (Hyde & Power, 2003; Power & Leigh, 2011). Despite improvements in earlier diagnosis of deafness and advances in audiological technology, language and educational outcomes for DHH students are generally much lower than those for their hearing peers (Ching, Leigh & Dillon, 2013; Qi & Mitchell, 2011) and require specialised educational interventions provided by qualified Teachers of the Deaf.

Although deafness is usually considered to affect the sense of hearing alone, there is evidence that limited access to auditory input and spoken language during early childhood years also results in a range of learning challenges for DHH students. Undoubtedly, the advances in digital hearing aids and cochlear implant technology have improved general language outcomes for DHH students. However, for a proportion of DHH children, congenital, prelingual deafness can result in a cascade of complex effects.

Teachers of the Deaf are also required to identify and implement strategies that maximise educational opportunities for students whose first language is Auslan. Although less than 20 percent of DHH students use Auslan as their primary language for communication and learning (Hyde & Punch, 2011), it is important that Teachers of the Deaf can communicate directly with these students and are competent to provide a positive Auslan language model. Ideally Teachers of the Deaf should therefore attain a level of Auslan proficiency that supports the students' optimal access to the school curriculum.

The United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities General Comment No. 4 on the right to inclusive education highlights the provisions essential for Deaf and hard of hearing students to acquire the life, language and social skills essential for participation in education and within their communities. In their Position Paper on Inclusive Education the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) advocates for inclusive education for deaf learners that is of high quality with direct instruction in sign language, access to deaf teachers and deaf peers who use sign language, and a bilingual curriculum that includes the study of sign language.

Accordingly, in order to facilitate DHH students' equitable access to optimal learning experiences on the same basis as their hearing peers, teachers of the deaf need to ensure that specific adjustments are made to learning environments. These adjustments may include: suitable acoustic conditions, appropriate listening technology, clear access to visual information for lipreading and contextual support, provision of individual tutoring to increase understanding of curriculum content, concepts and vocabulary, availability of inclusion aides and facilitation of social interactions (Punch & Hyde, 2011).

Other adjustments may include real-time captioning, Auslan educational interpreters, note-takers and differentiation in teaching such as the modification of curriculum materials to suit the students' language skills. Teachers of the Deaf are trained to identify specific teaching and intervention

strategies that support DHH students to become independent learners rather than relying on assistance to complete learning tasks that do not match their language and cognitive ability.

## Conclusion

The education of Deaf and hard of hearing children is a field where strong beliefs and opinions can override the educational rights of the child. Parents want their children to reflect them, and this can restrict the educational options for children. To acquire any language children must have exposure, in quality and quantity to accessible language input, from capable language users in a meaningful way.

All Deaf and hard of hearing children need to be provided with exposure to competent language users of English and Auslan to reach their developmental and educational potential. Early intervention services need to move away from a choice between English or Auslan to one that provides both languages to Deaf and hard of hearing children from the time of diagnosis. An either-or model has left too many Deaf and hard of hearing students leaving school without the necessary skills to participate as equals in society. Their hearing loss has become an impediment to future learning and employment, leaving them vulnerable to abuse.

All deaf children need to be able to access high quality instruction in sign language with teachers who can advocate for them and transmit social and cultural capital.

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