For and on behalf of the Dyslexia Parent Network Victoria

Submission:

The Dyslexia Parent Network Victoria (DPNV) is a grass roots community based organization whose aim is to support the parents of children who have Specific Learning Disabilities such as dyslexia and dyscalculia.

When amending the Disability Discrimination Act 1992, (DDA) or the Disability Standards for Education (DSE) acts we would like to bring to your attention a number of considerations.

•The DDA and the DSO have 'no teeth'. The reason for the research which resulted in the excellent Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC) report, (Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, 2012), was the large number of complaints to that body by parents who have children with disabilities, including learning disabilities.
One of its findings was the lack of knowledge about the DDA and the DSE by educators and their consequent lack of compliance with the Acts.

•The DDA has ill defined 'reasonable adjustments'. The rationale for these is to create a 'level playing field' for children with disabilities, including learning disabilities. In Victoria, the responsibility for these, in a school situation, is the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA). VCAA is responsible for what it calls 'special provision'. For example, special provision may be applied for when a child has a learning disability such as dyslexia. In Victoria, VCAA may allow an extra fifteen minutes reading time in a year twelve examination. The situation in Tasmania is very different. There, a child with dyslexia is likely to get thirty minutes extra reading time, and to have their spelling disregarded because phonetic spelling is common with dyslexic students. As all students now are given an Australia wide ATAR score, this difference in special provision is discrimination, which affects students on entry to universities and to employment.

•As mentioned in the VEOHRC report, compliance with the DDA and DSE is very patchy in Victoria. Some schools have achieved 'dyslexia friendly' status, while others have little or no knowledge of the Acts at all. An example of this can be found in the dissemination of the More Support for Students With Disabilities (MSSWD) funding (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2012). Through the Learning Difficulties School Support program, Victorian schools were notified in June 2012, via the DCEED schools' bulletin, that every government school in Victoria would receive a minimum of $2000 to 'facilitate effective, innovative and inclusive practices for students with learning difficulties (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2012, p. 1). It further states that 'Parents and carers are encouraged to discuss their interest with key staff at their child's school.'
When parents from the DPNV did this the responses from the key personnel in a number of schools varied considerably. They included 'Thank you for mentioning this. I had not heard of it.' : ' This is not new money, this is old money and has been allocated.' : ' Yes! We have some Professional Development planned'.
This is an example of poor communication between the DCEED and Victorian schools. Poor communication could be a reason for the 'patchy' performance of Victorian schools with regard to compliance with the DDA and DSE.

Another area of 'patchy' performance is at the university level. Some universities offer pre-service education courses which give information about the DDA and DSA while some do not. The 'patchy' situation also applies to information about disabilities, including learning disabilities.

•The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) is responsible for accrediting pre-service education university courses from 2013 on a rolling five-year basis. Without accreditation, a university course would not be attractive to students, as these students could not receive teacher registration.
The criteria for accreditation are contained within the National Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Instutute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011). Standard 1.6 requires a graduate teacher 'Demonstrates broad knowledge and understanding of legislative requirements and teaching strategies that support participation and learning of students with disabilities.' (Australian Instutute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011, p. 9). If these criteria are applied it will ensure that, over a period of time, teachers would be more aware of their legal responsibilities.
However, with regard to teachers' knowledge and understanding of students with disabilities including learning disabilities, the standards are open to interpretation. Standard 1.5 states that teachers must 'Differentiate teaching to meet the specific learning needs of students across the full range of abilities.' (Australian Instutute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011, p. 9). There is no SPECIFIC mention in standard 1.5 of students with disabilities including learning disabilities.
The recent Productivity Commission report called 'The Schools Workforce', further states that 'Assessments of the accreditation arrangements will need to pay close attention to the adequacy with which pre-service training courses deliver the standards relevant to the learning needs of disadvantaged students'. (Productivity Commission 2012, p. 279). 'Disadvantaged students', in this context includes students who have learning disabilities.

In conclusion, it can be seen that if there were consequences for non-compliance, if the definitions of 'reasonable adjustments' were consistent throughout Australia and if pre-service education courses were informed about disabilities including learning disabilities, the lives of such students would be improved.

References

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