

Submission to the Review of Funding for Schooling

Learning Difficulties Australia (LDA)

Contact: Molly de Lemos, Honorary Secretary LDA, email delemos@pacific.net.au

30 September, 2011

Learning Difficulties Australia is an association of teachers and other professionals dedicated to assisting students with learning difficulties through effective teaching practices based on scientific research, both in the classroom and through individualised instruction.

Following the announcement by the Prime Minister in April 2010 of a comprehensive review of school funding arrangements, the Review Panel headed by David Gonski undertook a series of consultations over the period July to December 2010, and has since released two discussion papers, *Review of Funding for Schooling: Emerging Issues Paper* (16 December 2010), which summarised the views presented by stakeholders during the initial listening tour, and a Paper on Commissioned Research, which was released on 31 August 2011 together with four research reports.

Public submissions to the review process close on 30 September 2011.

This submission has been prepared in response to some of the issues raised in the review papers and submissions made by other organisations, focusing specifically on questions relating to funding of students with learning difficulties and special needs.

In reviewing the commissioned research and submissions to the Gonski Review so far available, there seems to be general agreement on the following issues:

- Australia has a problem with literacy and numeracy; overall rates are dropping and we have an unacceptably long tail of underachievement.
- High socio-economic groups achieve higher academic achievement levels than low socio-economic groups, but that under-achievement exists at all levels.
- We need to better teachers, better teaching and learning programs, and better school leaders.
- Funding for disadvantaged students and students with special needs is complex, lacks transparency and needs to be simplified.
- We have no data that informs us which programs are effective in improving student academic achievement.

While the traditional approach to funding for students with special needs is based on the assumption that providing extra funding for such students will in itself solve the problem of addressing the additional needs of these students, studies have shown that there is no direct or simple relationship between the quantum of funding for school education and the outcomes

of schooling (see for example Jennifer Buckingham's submission to the Review Panel, dated 30 March 2011).

As noted by the Nous Group in their report to the Gonski review (*Schooling challenges and opportunities: A report for the review of funding for schooling panel, 1 August 2011*),

All prominent educationalists emphasise that, putting aside the variables that can't be controlled (like SES status), what goes on in the classroom is most important to influencing student success. There has been a lot of discussion in Australia about curriculum and *what* should be taught in schools, but less debate about *how* it is taught.

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There is now a strong consensus that classroom instruction needs to be highly directed to addressing the specific needs of the students present, rather than directed towards simply working through the set curriculum. Many teachers and schools are giving this the attention it deserves. We highlight the point here, however, because it is important for the wider community to understand what the latest research suggests, and also to argue that these intentional, tailored approaches are adopted consistently in all schools by all teachers.

This view is consistent with the growing body of research evidence that effective teaching is based on explicit direct instruction, and that this is particularly important in the case of students who have difficulties with learning or special needs (see for example the *National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy*, at http://www.dest.gov.au/nitl/documents/report_recommendations.pdf), and the Report of the Dyslexia Working Party on *Helping people with dyslexia: a national action agenda*, submitted to the Hon Bill Shorten, Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities and Children's Services in January 2010).

On this basis, and in line with current developments in the United States and the United Kingdom, LDA would like to propose that Australia adopts a model of funding for students with learning difficulties and special needs based on the Response to Intervention model.

This model is based on a three tiered model which requires that:

- all students receive First Wave evidence-based, data-driven effective instruction
- students who make progress at a rate slower than their peers are immediately identified and receive Second Wave more intensive, small group, evidence-based instruction
- any student who continues to make slow progress then receives Third Wave intensive evidence-based effective instruction from a highly competent teacher.

The advantage of this model is that:

- it focuses on initial effective instruction that benefits all students, and reduces the number of students who fall behind in their initial learning due to ineffective teaching practices, rather than to inherent learning problems, that is, the so-called 'instructional casualties'

- it eliminates the need for costly diagnostic assessment to identify students who meet criteria for special funding, since extra support is based on ongoing monitoring of their progress in response to effective teaching and ongoing support
- it is a more effective use of funding since it is targeted at students most in need of funding, and supports only effective teaching practices implemented by skilled teachers with specific training in supporting students with special learning needs.

For the Response to Intervention model to be effective, it is necessary that teachers are adequately prepared by their pre-service teacher education or by targeted in-service professional development programs to implement effective programs of initial teaching, particularly in the area of beginning reading, since poor reading skills is the main source of subsequent problems in learning.

For further information on the Response to Intervention Model, see Wheldall (2011).

In conclusion, we urge the Review Committee to consider allocation of funding to implement effective teaching using the Response to Intervention model as the most effective and economic approach to supporting students with learning difficulties and special needs, and at the same time raising levels of literacy and numeracy across all sectors, and particularly for students from low socio-economic and disadvantaged backgrounds.

References

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