



Department
of Education



About this Communique

The Department of Education (DE) – Community Sector Organisation (CSO) Governance Group is a quarterly forum for communication, consultation, engagement and collaboration between the Department and the community sector. Meetings are co-chaired by the Department and the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) and reflect topics of mutual interest to DE and the sector. You can read more about the partnership agreement that underpins this work on the [VCOSS](#) and [Department](#) websites.

This Communique has been prepared by VCOSS to increase the visibility of this forum.

What was discussed in the August 2023 meeting?

The focus of this meeting was disability.

Disability support in schools – Fighting for Students with Disability and their Families.

Deborah Parker, Director Policy and Program, Inclusive Education Division provided an overview of the *Fighting for Students with Disability and their Families* package. The 2023–24 Victorian Budget confirmed a \$203 million investment in the package over the next four years. The 'Fighting for Students with Disability and their Families' package of initiatives seeks to help families and carers to access the assistance they require for their children's education and broader support. The package responds to the growing number of students with disability requiring support to access reasonable adjustments to access education. It includes funds for government specialist schools to extend outside hours care, introduce NDIS Navigators, construct new hydrotherapy pools, and increase access to school camps, excursions, and incursions. Outside the Department of Education, the Government is also investing in officers to support students with disability to transition into the TAFE sector and scholarships for allied health workers to help address the intense demand for qualified staff, and upskilling healthcare workforces to better understand the needs of autistic children and young people. In addition, \$3m in additional funding was allocated to the Association for Children with Disability (ACD) to establish and manage the Premier's Lived Experience Committee.

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) software grants

Alan Wilson, Manager Disability and Additional Needs, Inclusive Education Division provided an overview of the Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) software initiative. The purpose of the initiative is to give students with complex communication needs better access to AAC software. The Government has committed \$100,000 for this financial year to create a fund that schools can apply to for grants to access this software. This initiative was announced for Proloquo2go (a symbol-based communication app) but has been extended to other AAC software. Both specialist and mainstream schools can apply in Term 3, 2023. The Department is also exploring which schools are using AAC, how it is being used, and how speech pathologists are involved with its application. There may be another round of AAC software grants in early 2024 depending on reported needs and the response to the 2023 grants round.

Supporting Deaf and hard-of-hearing students to thrive and have a great education.

Phillip Waters, General Manager Deaf Victoria, provided information about the estimated number of Deaf people there are in Victoria (between 5,000–7,000 people who use Auslan on a day-to-day basis, with approximately 1 million people with varying levels of hearing loss). There are around 2,500 Deaf and hard of hearing children in Victorian schools, most of which are supported by the Visiting Teacher Service (VTS). Phillip summarised the common challenges faced by Deaf students, and the negative impacts that social isolation, exclusion and a lack of high achieving Deaf role models can have on students' mental health, wellbeing, education, and employment outcomes. Phillip, Melissa Hale (Manager, Disability Advocacy Resource Unit) and Mija Gwyn (Manager, Youth Disability Advocacy Service) also shared insights from their lived experience of growing up Deaf to build a picture of how we might work together to build an education system and community that is more inclusive and to enable better outcomes for Deaf and hard of hearing students.

The following recommendations were drawn from the discussion:

- Invest in data systems and research to better understand the needs, experiences, and education outcomes of Deaf and hard of hearing students.
- Invest in research to better understand which interventions lead to the best outcomes for Deaf and hard of hearing students.
- Ensure that education and related government policies are informed by the lived experiences of Deaf students and their families, and Deaf adults.
- Broaden the scope of the Victorian Deaf Education Institution (VDEI) to bolster its ability to coordinate support for Deaf students and their families, and provide access to technology and technological support and professional development for people currently working in a school community.
- Establish mechanisms coordinated by the VDEI to ensure that Deaf and hard of hearing students in mainstream schools have opportunities to connect with peers from across the state to reduce social isolation, build community, support language development, and grow the number of people in Victoria who speak Auslan.
- Ensure Deaf and hard of hearing students receive the mental health, social and emotional wellbeing and education supports they need, when they need it.
- Build inclusive communities in schools to prevent social isolation, bullying and poor mental health among Deaf and hard of hearing students.
- Employ Deaf people to become teachers and education support aides employed in specialist and mainstream schools to provide students with access to role models with lived experience of being Deaf or hard of hearing.
- Promote existing supports (such as DeafConnectEd) and services that are in place to support transitions to TAFE, university, and employment.

Next meeting

The theme of the Term 4 meeting (Wednesday November 22, 2023) will be education engagement. Please contact VCOSS if there is something you would like to share with us, to guide our planning for future meetings.

Contact:

Deb Fewster, Director, Policy, and Advocacy

Email: Deborah.fewster@vcoss.org.au.

Joanna Hatcher, Policy Advisor (Education, Children, Young People and Families)

Email: Joanna.Hatcher@vcoss.org.au