

The Principal Research Officer  
Education and Health Standing Committee  
Legislative Assembly  
Parliament House  
Perth 6000

Re: APPRAISAL OF ADEQUACY OF SCREENING PROCESSES FOR  
SERVICES AT PREPRIMARY AND PRIMARY SCHOOL LEVEL

## **ISSUE 1 Hearing Screening**

### **Situation at present:**

School nurses assess the hearing of all pre-primary children, in a quiet room on the school grounds at:

(a) 1000Hz and 4000Hz

- to pass, the child needs to respond to 1000Hz and 4000Hz at 25dB bilaterally
- if the child 'fails' he/she is noted down for a retest weeks later.

(b) On retest, 500Hz, 1000Hz, 2000Hz and 4000 Hz are tested:

- to pass, the child needs to respond to all frequencies at 25dB
- If the child fails the retest, he/she is referred onwards

### **HOWEVER**

Current audiology literature describes the normal range of hearing for children as being **0 to 15 dB** (e.g. Northern and Downs, 2002). These authors explain that a child with a slight hearing loss (i.e. between 15 and 25dB) may miss unvoiced consonants (/t/ /k/ /s/) etc. The child does not therefore hear the whole message spoken to him/her and misses much of the teacher's speech. Often in the younger years this loss may fluctuate due the incidence of otitis media. The child may infer a lot and may misunderstand. This is tiring and often the child may just stop listening as it is too hard. The child may then daydream or become disruptive in the classroom. Preferential seating for this child in the classroom is a given but is not enough. Many of these children may require further assistance e.g. auditory training, speech therapy as well.

It is thus of concern that the present WA screening does not pick up children with a slight hearing loss.

From a practical point of view, taking into account the reality that hearing screenings are conducted in quiet rooms and not sound-treated audiology booths, the above authors imply that hearing screening at 15 dB may not be viable. The authors state therefore, that when referring to hearing screening of the 3 – 5 year old child **“the criterion for referral is when a child does not respond at 20dB HL at least 2 of 3 times at any test frequency in either ear ....”**

**I would encourage the hearing screening levels in WA to thus be dropped to 20dB**

**ISSUE 2 Support Services for school aged children who do not fall within the Schools Plus Guidelines but are struggling at school**

Children with slight hearing loss often present with similar learning difficulties to many of their peers in the classroom, all needing extra tuition to promote the development of literacy which could be provided e.g. by daily literacy teacher practice in small groups of 2 or 3 and/or by allied health therapists as required e.g. speech pathologists, occupational therapists, etc. In Victoria, the education department provides funding for the assessment of and subsequent therapy for, children who do not have other disabilities apart from a learning disability. In WA, these children would not be candidates for Schools Plus funding but they do require extra assistance to make optimum progress during their school years.

SCDC has to rationalise services. Its staffing allocation has not changed in the last 16 years even though the primary school population (years 1 to 7) in WA has grown from 93,162 in the 1992 census to 169,870 in the 2006 census. The Australian Bureau of statistics stated on March 19, 2008, that "WA is the fastest growing state (2.4%)".

Thus, support services for school children (and thus funding for them) needs to be put in to place urgently. This could be done in either of two ways:

- a) By injecting funds into the already existing child development centres, so that more paediatricians, allied health staff and support staff can be employed to fill the vacuum for school aged intervention of children who do not fall within the Schools Plus disability categories;
- b) Alternatively, the Education Department needs to set up the process of providing "in-school" assessment and therapy services for children requiring these services who do not fall within the Schools Plus guidelines.

With kind regards,

State Child Development Centre

9 May 2008