

FINDINGS OF THE INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF THE VICTORIAN COLLEGE FOR THE DEAF

Minister's Foreword

As you are aware, in June 2018 I requested an independent review into the Victorian College for the Deaf in response to concerns raised by the school community.

I am pleased to inform you that the review panel's independent chair, Ms Veronica Pardo, has submitted the review report, which details the analysis and findings collected through a series of stakeholder meetings, a community workshop, and an online survey. The report provides a set of recommendations aimed to position the College for success. A copy of the summary report is provided for your reference.

I am also pleased to advise that the Department of Education and Training has accepted all of the report's recommendations, and has been working to develop an action plan in consultation with the school to act on these recommendations.

This review has provided a unique opportunity for the school and broader community to come together to develop and deliver a shared vision for the College's future. This includes the educators and specialist support staff, parents and carers, extended family members, students, service providers, peak bodies, and the broader community who help support and contribute to lifelong achievements for students who are deaf or hard of hearing.

A great education system widens opportunities for all and empowers students with the skills, knowledge and experience they need to build healthy, happy and prosperous lives. Achieving excellence in the Education State is about improving outcomes for every student, in every classroom, in every community – and that includes current and future students attending the Victorian College for the Deaf.

I am pleased to hear of the groundswell of support Ms Pardo and the review panel have engendered with the school and broader community. I look forward to the continued momentum and shared vision coming to life.

Thank you for your ongoing commitment and support for the Victorian College for the Deaf.



The Hon James Merlino MP

Deputy Premier

Minister for Education

28 August 2019

Victorian College for the Deaf Review

Summary Report

Prepared by: Veronica Pardo, Independent Chair, Victorian College for the Deaf Review Panel

Date: 4 April 2019

Background

In June 2018, the Hon James Merlino MP, Minister for Education, requested a review of the Victorian College for the Deaf in response to significant community concern about aspects of the school.

In response to the Minister's request, an independent review of the Victorian College for the Deaf has been undertaken by the Department of Education and Training.

The review commenced during Term 3, 2018, and overseen by a review panel, with recommendations and options to be made available for decision-makers during Term 1, 2019.

Note

A central assumption of this review is that there is ongoing support for a Victorian government operated educational program at the Victorian College for the Deaf (VCD) for deaf and hard of hearing students.

The central recommendation of the review panel is to establish VCD as a viable and innovative bilingual/bicultural program based on Auslan and English and international leading practice in bilingual education.

Methodology

The methodology employed by this review consisted of meetings with key stakeholders, an online survey and a community workshop. In order to provide access to all stakeholders, every effort was made for community engagement to be conducted in English and Auslan, either through direct communication in Auslan, Auslan interpreters, Auslan interpreted texts, live captioning and graphic illustration.

Interviews were conducted with representatives of the following stakeholder groups:

- Parents and carers
- Advocacy groups
- Service providers within the deaf sector
- Education providers (both school and post school)
- Teacher training providers
- Deaf community leaders
- Former and current staff.

The central focus of the all the data gathering methodologies was:

- a) To identify the issues currently impacting on the school community;
- b) To explore solutions to current issues;
- c) To identify what role VCD plays within the deaf education system; and
- d) To identify potential actions that may lead to desired change for VCD.

The data gathered through the online survey and community workshop was analysed and then considered by the review panel.

An accredited school reviewer was also engaged to undertake the quadrennial school review. This involved the school reviewer working closely with the Acting Principal and school staff to review its performance

against the last School Strategic Plan and to develop a set of key directions for the next strategic plan including goals, targets and key improvement strategies. The school reviewer was a member of the review panel and provided advice on her findings and next steps to the review panel.

The school reviewer's report was presented to the College in Term 4, 2018. The goals, targets and key improvement strategies identified through this process have not been duplicated in this report.

Findings and Analysis

The issues that have been identified in the course of this review are highly complex, reflecting challenges that are both school-specific and manifestations of broader systemic issues in the education of deaf and hard of hearing students. To that end, many of the issues and related recommendations may need to be considered within a broader systemic context. For the purposes of this review, where possible, the review panel has attempted to locate issues and solutions within the scope of the school's capacity to consider and implement change.

The panel wishes to record the overwhelmingly positive response of stakeholders to this review. Almost without exception, the stakeholders who have contributed to this review spoke with passion about the importance of VCD within the deaf education landscape and their desire to see solutions emerge to address current challenges. There was a universal hope expressed that VCD could be supported to grow and thrive as a centre of excellent practice in the education of deaf children and as a focal point for connection with the deaf community.

In order to provide recommendations for future actions, the analysis and findings have been structured around the following key themes:

1. Improving education at VCD: expectations and outcomes
2. Assessment of student need
3. Education methodology
4. Teacher training and professional development
5. Mission and reputation
6. Access to language and culture
7. Access to support services through effective partnerships
8. Ensuring that the school meets the Victorian Registration and Qualification Authority's minimum requirements for school registration.

1. Improving education at VCD: expectations and outcomes

Summary of Key Findings

- The school has yet to meet previously established goals around student outcomes, language proficiency, attendance, wellbeing, and post school outcomes.
- Expectations for students attending VCD were found to be low compared to their deaf peers in mainstream education settings.
 - This may have a detrimental impact on student outcomes, the reputation of the school, and ultimately enrolment numbers.
- Lack of progress in relation to educational outcomes may be seen as a human rights issue of considerable urgency, with life-long consequences.
- Effective pathway options (VCE, VET and VCAL) were not always available to students, and were impacted by decreasing enrolments and the scarcity of Auslan proficient secondary Teachers of the Deaf and Auslan interpreters.
- Closer links to, and collaboration with, local schools was highly desired by stakeholders, and is seen as providing opportunities to improve expectations, and increasing pathways.

2. Assessment of student need

Summary of Key Findings

- Inadequate processes are in place to determine student needs and to underpin an effective individualised planning and reporting culture, resulting in significant challenges to individualised planning, identification of appropriate supports and limited gains in learning.
- There is a need for consistent application of assessment tools which reflect evidenced-based practice.
- Factors such as access to transport are playing a critical role in determining enrolment which warrants further investigation.

3. Educational methodology

Summary of Key Findings

- The panel has taken a holistic approach which recognises the systemic interdependencies and complementarities between specialist and mainstream settings, which must be preserved for the benefit of all deaf and hard of hearing students.
- A bilingual/bicultural approach is recommended to enable the possibility of an inclusive education model with a broader range of students accessing VCD's educational programs.
- VCD will best suit deaf and hard of hearing students for whom a bilingual/bicultural education has been determined to be appropriate.
- There is value in having a provider within the deaf education system that offers a significant point of difference from a mainstream deaf education setting.
- There is a need for a specialist centre (physical and virtual) to provide ongoing support to mainstream settings where students and staff are utilising Auslan or bilingual/bicultural approaches.
- There was strong support amongst stakeholders for greater connectivity between specialist and mainstream settings in deaf education.

4. Teacher training and professional development

Summary of Key Findings

- Existing Teacher of the Deaf training programs are challenged to provide sufficient emphasis on bilingual/bicultural methodologies to meet the requirements of this approach.
- VCD has at times encountered significant challenges in recruiting staff with appropriate competencies and experience to suit a bilingual/bicultural model.
- A successful bilingual/bicultural program will need to have built in Auslan language acquisition pathways for teachers and school staff, requiring a highly innovative model that draws on international best practice.
- The VDEI has a key role to play in supporting the implementation of the recommendations of this review.

5. Mission and reputation

Summary of Key Findings

- The reputation of the school was a critical theme throughout the consultation process.
- The reputational issues related to:
 - Perception of educational expectations and outcomes;
 - Skills and qualifications of staff;
 - Levels of family/community engagement; and

- Perception of transparency and accountability.
- There is considerable confusion across stakeholder groups about the mission/purpose of VCD, what it offers as an educational institution, and to whom.
- There is significant concern about the ability of the school to adequately cater for students with additional disabilities.

6. Access to language and culture

Summary of Key Findings

- An effective bilingual/bicultural education program for deaf and hard of hearing students must have at its heart, competent language models who are both deaf and hearing.
- In order to facilitate the role of families as partners in the educational journey of the students at VCD it is desirable to offer opportunities for families to learn Auslan.
- It is necessary to build opportunities for dynamic engagement with the school community in order to effectively transmit language and culture in a way that optimises the learning outcomes of students in a bilingual/bicultural approach.
- In relation to the bicultural component of bilingual/bicultural approaches, it is important that deaf and hard of hearing students have access to deaf language and cultural models, across a range of roles which includes teachers and support staff.

7. Access to support services through effective partnerships

Summary of Key Findings

- Access to support services such as speech pathology, psychology, occupational therapy, case management, mentoring, recreation, independent living skills, post-secondary transition was raised as a major concern.
- A comprehensive assessment of student needs requires access to a range of services for diagnostic and planning purposes.
- While relationships and partnerships with service providers are happening, they have not always delivered optimal results.
- There is a need to rethink how service providers might be engaged to support the achievement of educational goals, especially within the changing landscape of the NDIS.
- There is significant appetite for innovation within this context, with opportunities for research partnerships which could benefit the broader sector as well as the VCD student population.

8. Ensuring that the school meets the Victorian Registration and Qualification Authority's minimum requirements for school registration

Summary of Key Findings

- As part of the quadrennial school review, the school reviewer undertook the assessment of the minimum standards for school registration, including Child Safe Standards. Aspects of the evidence required to meet the minimum standards were not available for the reviewer to examine, and subsequently the school was found to be non-compliant at the time the school review report was finalised in late 2018.
- The review panel noted that:
 - the school had not completed this documentation due to staff all being new to leadership roles and the tight timeframes for the school review, and
 - the Department of Education and Training would support the school to achieve compliance using the processes for follow-up, including working with the leadership team.

Recommendations

Overarching recommendations

1. Establish an advisory group to support the leadership team to review and determine educational models, implement recommendations, and monitor and report on progress to DET, including representation from:
 - Deaf education experts
 - Bilingual education experts
 - Deaf community
 - DET (representatives from policy, health, wellbeing and the region)
 - School Council President
 - Principal
2. The advisory group should provide advice on:
 - fit-for-purpose models for the delivery of high-quality, bilingual, bicultural education for Deaf and hard of hearing students, including consideration of inclusive models; and
 - a Leading Thinker in Residence Program to enable the school to access leading thinking and practice in bilingual/bicultural education for deaf and hearing students.

Recommendations related to the school's performance

3. Improve benchmarking of student expectations and assessment of outcomes that is congruent with other deaf education DET settings and international evidence-based practice;
4. Improve mechanisms for student pathways such as VCAL, VCE and VET through strategic partnerships and alliances;

Recommendations related to issues of concern raised by members of the community, including but not limited to:

a. transport issues

b. eligibility criteria for enrolment at VCD.

5. Introduce consistent, comprehensive and evidence-based processes for assessment of student need; and
6. Undertake a separate review of transport arrangements for enrolled students.

Glossary

- AAL – Augmentative and Alternative Communication
- AITSL – Australian Professional Standards for Teachers
- EAL – English as an Additional Language
- LOTE – Languages Other Than English
- NDIS – National Disability Insurance Scheme
- STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
- VCD – Victorian College for the Deaf
- VCE – Victorian Certificate of Education
- VCAL – Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning
- VDEI – Victorian Deaf Education Institute
- VET – Vocational Education and Training