

Cash truancy, in a manner of speaking Special-needs pinch



Difficulty: Emily Strachan and Rebekah Turner outside VCAT. Picture: FIONA HAMILTON

THE State Government has been accused of ripping up to \$50 million in education cash from some of Victoria's most vulnerable children.

Students with learning disabilities have lost specialist one-on-one classroom help to departmental penny-pinching, a tribunal heard this week.

Changes to the Education Department's disability criteria for students with language disorders has seen more than 6550 kids struck off this year, the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal heard.

Last year, 6760 state school students received help for the disorders.

Only 208 students have qualified for help this year, the figures show.

Each of the cut-off students received an estimated \$8000 a year for classroom help—a saving of about \$50 million for the Government, say lawyers for a girl with a language problem who is suing the department.

But the department told VCAT the savings had been redistributed to schools to allow them to pay for specialist language support programs students needed.

Lawyers for Ringwood

Jane Metlikovec

Secondary College year 9 student Rebekah Turner said it appeared schools could spend the money as they wish.

Outraged parents of at least four other students are now lining up to sue.

Rebekah and her family are fighting for her right to an integration aide, speech pathology services and compensation.

Rebekah, 15, diagnosed as suffering a severe language disorder, has been knocked back for classroom support at different schools since 1999.

Her lawyer, James Gray, said outside the hearing the Government was saving millions through its redefinition of a language disorder.

"They are saving up to \$50 million a year and while they say they are redistributing some of that back to schools, it is only apparent that a small portion of that is being redirected back to schools," Mr Gray said.

"But now the schools can spend it on anything they like — they can buy new basketballs with it.

"Meanwhile the kids with language disorders continue to miss out."

To qualify for language disorder support last year, students needed to

SPEAKING OUT

Students funded under language disorder categories:

Year	No. of students funded
2000	2693
2001	3283
2002	3978
2003	4284
2004	5193
2005	6760
2006	208

■ Categories include severe language disorder and severe language disorder with critical education needs

* Includes primary and secondary

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display language skills minus two standard deviations below the mean.

That was raised to minus three at the start of this year.

"I feel like I'm standing up for the rest of the people who need support," Rebekah said outside the hearing.

"It is very stressful to sit and listen to everything being brought up, but hopefully I will get the help I need and have wanted for ages."

Emily Strachan, 15, a year 9 student who also

suffers a severe language disorder, qualified for an integration aide until a few years ago.

"I can't understand what I am supposed to be doing, then I can't do it. It makes me pretty upset," Emily said.

Peter Hanks, QC, for the Education Department, told VCAT Rebekah had been consistently praised for school work in a variety of reports.

The hearing, before VCAT deputy president Cate McKenzie, was to continue today.