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Speech Pathologists concerned that children with language difficulties are missing out on support

Several thousand Victorian students struggle each year to participate in classroom activities, due to underlying difficulties with speech and language. Without adequate support and intervention these students are at risk of poor academic achievement, difficulty with reading and writing, disruptive behaviour and poor social skills.

This year the Victorian Education Department changed their assessment criteria for what constitutes a severe language disorder, going against national and international benchmarks. This decision is heavily impacting funding assistance for students who require speech pathology services at school.

- Children with a severe language disorder now only receive help if they are 3 standard deviations or more below the norm. In previous years, they received assistance if they were 2 standard deviations below the norm.
- As well, children with a severe language disorder will now also have to demonstrate a Critical Educational Need (CEN) in order to receive funding. A CEN is a severe behavioural, safety or health problem.

Children in other disability categories, such as hearing impaired, visually impaired and physically disabled, are not required to show this additional Critical Educational Need.

Trish Bradd, President of Speech Pathology Australia, the national peak body for speech pathologists, is concerned that students requiring communication and language assistance, including speech pathology services and integration aides, are missing out.

“Not only has the Education Department raised the bar, they have also placed a major hurdle in the way of children desperately needing individualised speech pathology assistance,” she says.

- Government funding for Victorian children with severe language disorders was over \$50 million in 2005. The current 2006 funding appears to have been slashed to just over \$3 million.
- In 2006 the number of students receiving funding assistance has dropped to just 208. In contrast, 6760 children received this much-needed help in 2005.

“Minimising funding for an individual who needs this support has major implications for the child’s ability to participate fully in activities central to classroom-based learning. This can have life-long learning and social effects,” Ms Bradd says.

Schools currently have a funding base for Language Support Programs which trained teachers or integration aides run. However these broad oral language programs do not meet the needs of children with specific language impairments who require more intensive, specialised assistance.

Longer term, people with communication difficulties may suffer mental health issues and behavioural problems, display poor self esteem and can struggle to manage social relationships and sustain employment. Thus early and appropriate intervention will both benefit individual students and have social and economic benefits for the wider community, said Ms Bradd.

For general information please visit: www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au.

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Notes to Media:

- Speech Pathology Australia’s President, Trish Bradd is available for interview.

For media enquiries or to arrange an interview, please contact Caroline Huze, Marketing & Communications on (03) 9642 4899.