

VCAT summons minister

By **JULIA MEDEW**

EDUCATION Services Minister Jacinta Allan has been summoned to appear at the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal next month to answer questions in a discrimination claim against the Department of Education.

Ms Allan has been asked to give evidence in the case of Rebekah Turner, a 15-year-old student with a severe language disorder. The Year 9 student, who also suffers from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and depression, claims she has not been provided with a teaching aide for the last seven years despite repeatedly applying for assistance since 1999.

The summons came as anti-discrimination consultant Julie Phillips, who is working on Ms Turner's case, said four other families were planning similar action against the department.



Complaint: Rebekah Turner.

The tribunal heard this week that changes to the department's disability criteria for students with language disorders last year had seen more than 6557 children struck off its funding list, leaving only 203 receiving help.

Ms Turner's lawyer, James Gray, said yesterday that on his calculations, that meant the department was saving at least \$50 million this year. Chief executive of Speech Pathology Australia, Gail Mulcair, said:

"Inadequate support and intervention for these students has major implications for their ability to read and write."

Mr Gray was granted access to the department's formula for calculating funding for students with language disorders yesterday, which the tribunal heard had remained secret for 12 years.

Peter Hanks, QC, for the department, said the secrecy was aimed at preventing applicants from manipulating their needs to suit the criteria.

VCAT deputy president Cate McKenzie said the formula could be given to Mr Gray's legal team and expert witnesses if they undertook to preserve its confidentiality.

Mr Gray said he planned to question Ms Allan about changes to the funding model, but Mr Hanks told the tribunal that a Government-appointed solicitor might take the stand for her.

The hearing continues.