

To The Secretary, Government Administration Committee A, House of Assembly,  
Parliament House, Hobart, TAS, 7000.

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From Mark Warrington

Blind Citizens Australia – Tasmanian Branch

Submission to the Tasmanian Parliament Inquiry into Discrimination and Bullying in  
Tasmanian Schools

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## Introduction

We appreciate the opportunity to provide a submission to the Tasmanian Parliament's inquiry into discrimination and bullying in Tasmanian schools. Our submission aims to highlight the unique challenges faced by students with vision impairment and propose actionable solutions to foster a more inclusive and supportive educational environment.

## Overview of Blind Citizens Australia - Tasmanian Branch

Blind Citizens Australia (BCA) is the peak consumer organisation for Australians who are blind or vision impaired. Our Tasmanian branch is dedicated to advocating for the rights and interests of individuals with vision impairment in Tasmania, ensuring their voices are heard and their needs addressed.

## Key Issues

Students with vision impairment in Tasmanian schools face significant discrimination and bullying. These experiences range from social exclusion and verbal abuse to more

systemic forms of discrimination such as lack of access to appropriate educational resources and accommodations. Anecdotally a pattern of negative experiences has hindered the academic and social development of these students.

## Impact of Discrimination and Bullying

The impact of discrimination and bullying on students with vision impairment is profound. It affects their educational outcomes, social inclusion, and emotional well-being. Persistent bullying can lead to anxiety, depression, and a loss of confidence, further marginalising these students and impeding their ability to thrive in school.

## The outcome - Generational disadvantage

Discrimination in schools is a long term and generational issue. Many successive governments have had issues developing policies to alleviate this. An example of this is the official unemployment rate being double for disabled people, vs the general population and when it comes to underemployment vision impaired Australian's do not bode well, with only 24% of the eligible workforce in full time employment, according to a 2019 study <https://www.visionaustralia.org/news/2019-08-23/survey-shows-blind-people-significantly-underemployed-around-world> Whilst these statistics do not land fully upon the education system, they do have a part to play in the long term unemployment and underemployment statistics in Tasmania and Australia more broadly.

## Legislative Framework

Current Tasmanian legislation and policies on discrimination and bullying provide a foundation for protection, yet they often fall short in addressing the specific needs of students with vision impairment. There is a pressing need for more robust and targeted measures to ensure these students are adequately protected and supported.

## Policy and Practice Recommendations

We propose the following measures to address and prevent discrimination and bullying against students with vision impairment:

- Enhanced training for educators on disability awareness and inclusive practices.
- Implementation of comprehensive anti-bullying programs that specifically address the needs of students with disabilities.
- Development of clear guidelines for schools on accommodating students with vision impairment.

### Educational Support and Accessibility

It is crucial to ensure that students with vision impairment have access to reasonable accommodations and support within the school environment. This includes accessible learning materials, assistive technologies, and physical modifications to the school premises.

### Role of Educators and Awareness

Educators play a pivotal role in fostering inclusive school environments. Training programs should be implemented to enhance their understanding of vision impairment and equip them with the skills to support these students effectively. Additionally, promoting general awareness in classroom environments and extracurricular activities is essential to create a culture of respect and inclusion. There is an opportunity to increase awareness that vision impairment is a spectrum of experiences and while a person may be able to read their phone they may have trouble engaging in social activities such as team sports.

### Collaboration and Consultation

To effectively address discrimination and bullying, there must be enhanced collaboration between disability advocacy organisations, schools, and government agencies. This requires adequate funding and resources for organisations like BCA to actively participate in decision-making processes and provide valuable insights and support. Unfortunately, recent defunding of disability advocacy organisations has hampered our ability to contribute fully to these critical discussions.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we thank the Tasmanian Parliament for the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry. We urge the government to consider our recommendations and work collaboratively with us to create safe, inclusive, and discrimination-free learning environments for students with vision impairment. Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort and sustained commitment to ensure that all students have the opportunity to succeed and thrive in their educational journeys.

## Additional Concerns

While we are grateful for the opportunity to provide input, we must express some concerns regarding the process. The language used in the call for submissions was overly complex and not appropriately pitched for individuals who do not possess a strong legal vocabulary. This has likely deterred many from contributing their valuable experiences and insights. It was noted that in the Media Advisory “The Committee is particularly interested in hearing from young people.” Yet in the very next sentence it read “An advertisement calling for submissions will be placed in the three regional newspapers on Saturday, 29 June 2024.” We offer two points for reflection. When was the last time any of us observed a young person reading a newspaper and the print media as a means of advertising for submissions is not how you reach vision impaired young people.

Furthermore, the time frame between the call for submissions and the closing date was insufficient. Many individuals who have experienced discrimination and bullying need ample time to process their emotions and decide whether they are prepared to relive potentially traumatic experiences by sharing their stories. The limited time provided has undoubtedly restricted meaningful participation.

It is also important to note that the type of information sought in this inquiry is best gathered by well-funded organisations and professional consultants. The recent defunding of disability advocacy organisations has severely limited our capacity to respond comprehensively and provide the detailed, evidence-based input that such an inquiry warrants. We respectfully request that the government reassess the support provided to these crucial organisations to ensure that future consultations can benefit from their full expertise and resources.

Kind Regards

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On behalf of the BCA Tasmanian Branch Committee

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