Meeting the Disability Standards for Education in Victoria for students who are blind or vision impaired:

This formal submission to the ‘2015 Review of the Disability Standards for Education’ is Insight’s contribution, as educators of the blind and vision impaired, to help determine why the standards are consistently failing to be met. The review in its entirety spans early childhood education, schooling and higher education and the outcomes will be important, particularly as the community, including DET, is aware that the rate of unemployment for the blind or vision impaired is close to 70% and that the remaining ‘successful’ 30% includes many with an 'employment' classification of just 4 to 6 hours of work a week. High unemployment has been directly linked to the poor educational outcomes for this disability.

‘The answer is not to standardise education, but to personalise and customise it to the needs of each child and community. There is no alternative. There never was.’

Ken Robinson

The last decade of schooling for students who are blind or vision impaired has been both a complex and fragmented pathway for children and families in Victoria. Rather than dwell on past issues however, Insight’s goal is to assume the responsibility for steering conversations
and strategic change toward a positive future for blind and vision impaired students and, importantly, to address the issue of why their current educational provision is so obviously failing to achieve this.

Insight is also strongly committed to learning communities working closely together to achieve the best possible standard and combination of educational provision possible for students in Victoria. We commenced 2015 with a number of strategic partnerships in place, including Monash University and Guide Dogs Victoria, and extended further invitations across all sectors for service providers to join Insight Education in working together as strategic partners in order to ensure optimum learning outcomes for all students. This invitation included the Department of Education, Vision Australia, RIDBC & Renwick University, Scope, Quantum, Independent Options for Mobility, Humanware, Mainstream and Independent Principals and Schools and a host of other organisations and individuals. Many have already made a commitment to work closely with Insight to ensure that this learning community is not only supportive of one another’s expertise, but determined to link services together more effectively in order to ensure a coordinated approach to educating and supporting every student who is blind or vision impaired whether at primary, secondary or tertiary levels.

The Disability Standards for Education 2005 (the Standards), clarify the obligation of educational providers to ensure that students who are blind or vision impaired are able to access and participate in education on the same basis as all other Victorian students.

The Department of Education & Training (DET) Victoria provides specialist schools which cater for students with a range of disabilities and ensures that qualified staff and the facilities required to meet students’ specific learning needs are in place. Students may be enrolled full time, be on a pathway to eventual inclusion in mainstream school settings, or be enrolled on a dual enrolment or part-time basis. These schools may also provide support and professional development for classroom teachers and aides who teach students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms.

Currently there are approximately 84 government specialist schools in Victoria, in which 7,500 students are enrolled. Of these, 65 schools cater for intellectual disabilities, 5 for students with autism spectrum disorders, 4 for students with physical disabilities and 3 for students who are deaf or have hearing impairments. In stark contrast however, there are at present no government specialist schools in Victoria specifically targeted to meet the needs of students who are blind or vision impaired.

For this reason it is imperative that education providers in Victoria recognise the role that a newly established specialist school- Insight Education Centre for the Blind and Vision Impaired – can fulfil both now and into the future, to ensure that the educational needs of this group of students are met. This is critical if they are to fully access and participate in education ‘on the same basis’ as all other students in Victoria – including those who attend mainstream schools across the Government, Independent and Catholic sectors.

In the context of the Australian Curriculum, ‘on the same basis’ clearly indicates that blind and vision impaired students must have access to the same opportunities and choices as
their sighted peers. They are entitled to rigorous, relevant and engaging learning opportunities with the ability to access age-appropriate content from all learning areas of the Australian Curriculum in accordance with their individual learning needs, strengths, goals and interests. They must have full access to explicit instruction in the Expanded Core Curriculum and all of its domains, including mastery of Braille or other print alternatives. They must also be able to access a full range of assistive learning technologies embedded in their learning and which are specifically designed to enhance their learning outcomes.

Adaptation and modification of only a percentage of the learning materials and delivery of the curriculum in a regular classroom, where more than 85% of the learning is visual, will not satisfy this requirement. If existing methods of teaching and delivery in the mainstream classroom continue to be appropriate only for sighted students but not properly accessible for the blind and vision impaired, it is all too obvious that the deficit/gap created will have significant and lasting consequences for these students, not only while at school but throughout their lives.

Even in a best case scenario, if teachers were able to successfully adapt 80% of learning resources across the curriculum, then over the course of seven years at primary school, blind and vision impaired students would miss out on a great deal of learning before they transition to secondary school. Such an outcome, and many outcomes will be far less successful than this, does not appear to conform in any way to the provisions and requirements of the Disability Standards for Education or the Disability Discrimination Act. In instances where the adaptation of curriculum may range between the successful delivery of 40% - 60% of each lesson, even larger gaps in learning and in engagement with school will ensue. This is especially pertinent in secondary school settings where large numbers of staff are required to adapt the delivery of instruction and provide materials in large print or braille for students they may see for only 1-2 hours per week or for one school term or year. The result of these educational limitations inevitably impact seriously on achievement at secondary school, subsequently restrict access to tertiary education, and in turn minimise the chances of fulfilling career ambitions and of securing gainful employment in the workplace.

There are without doubt grounds to consider State wide and National audits of blind and vision impaired students at risk of leaving or completing school functionally illiterate. Insight is considering the formation of a Braille Task Force to help raise awareness that Fluent Braille readers usually start around the age of 3 or 4 years as Braille literacy is so fundamental to achieving success and autonomy at school and in the workforce.

“At present there remains a significant gap between students with disability and those without, notably in the attainment of Year 12 or equivalent, vocational education and training qualifications, and participation in university studies. Targeted support is needed to assist people who are disadvantaged in education and in the workforce, but mainstream education programs need to be designed for people of all abilities.”

**RECOMMENDATION 1 for the review of the effectiveness of the Disability Standards in Education**

That a strategic agreement is reached between Insight Education and both Federal and State Governments, which recognises and supports Insight Education’s role in providing and supporting educational pathways which directly contribute toward positive educational outcomes, and in turn, employment opportunities for blind and vision impaired students in Victoria.

There is considerable world-wide and research based evidence that blind and vision impaired students benefit significantly by being taught by specialist teachers who deliver the Expanded Core Curriculum (a vision specific curriculum), integrated into the regular curriculum. These students generally have higher levels of academic achievement and independence, better social skills, more successful transition from primary to secondary school settings and have improved tertiary education and employment rates.

*Since 2010 what progress has been made to support the learning needs and inclusion of blind and vision impaired students?*

If the established view is that integration is the preferred, and in fact the only, Government school option for blind and vision impaired students, then surely the same argument applies for students with other disabilities. The existence of approximately 85 Government special schools in Victoria with 7,500 students makes nonsense of the argument that integration is always the best option for all students. It is also a poignant reminder that blind and vision impaired students are being further disabled by a denial of their right to learn in an environment which meets their needs, not just for part of the time, but throughout each lesson of each day of their school lives. It is only when this issue is fully recognised and responded to that improved learning outcomes will begin to address the woeful prospect of a 70% chance of unemployment which these children and their families currently face.
Explicit Instruction

Educating students who are blind or vision impaired is often reduced to a 'standardised versus specialised' viewpoint and in Victoria we, for the most part, remain entrenched in the current integration model, which is endorsed and encouraged but is drastically under resourced and not held accountable for statistically disastrous and ineffective results for students over the long term.

Are parents satisfied with the standard of learning outcomes being achieved by their children in early childhood education, schooling and into tertiary education or vocational education and training?

Parents systematically report a lack of specialist staff, funding and time for their children. In some cases primary schools’ Individual Learning Plans (ILP’s), become unintentionally marginalising by lowering expectations of individual student’s progress and setting goals that fail to truly challenge, motivate and drive better learning outcomes for students with a disability. In secondary schools, supplementary programs are often limited and not targeted to develop blind and vision impaired student’s skills, knowledge and understanding across all Australian Curriculum and Expanded Core Curriculum subject areas. In fact across Primary and Secondary schools there is little or no explicit instruction of the Expanded Core Curriculum, nor is it presently embedded in the Australian Curriculum.

Why are the nine areas of the Expanded Core Curriculum, fundamental to the education of the blind and vision impaired, not embedded in the daily timetable at school for every student?

The Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) comprehensively addresses the 'hidden disabilities' of blind and vision impaired students and teaches them skills across all aspects of their learning that are absolutely essential for them to succeed both at school and in life. Without the ECC embedded in the Core Curriculum and taught explicitly, this will remain an unchallenged barrier for students to fully accessing and participating in education in a mainstream school setting.

RECOMMENDATION 2 for the review of the effectiveness of the Disability Standards in Education

That explicit instruction in The Expanded Core Curriculum is mandated as a matter of urgency for all blind and vision impaired primary and secondary school students.

This, if implemented, would go a long way toward addressing non-compliance with The Standards and rectifying a critical educational deficit.

Explicit instruction involves directing student attention toward specific learning, occurs in a highly structured environment, and focuses on producing clearly identified learning
outcomes. Topics and content are broken down into small parts and taught individually in a logical order. Explicit teaching involves modelling skills and behaviours as well as thinking processes. It involves teachers ‘thinking out loud’ when working through problems and demonstrating processes for students.

Consultancy based support for students provide assistance but not explicit instruction. It was not intended to, and is not designed to, replace effective teaching in a context of sequential lessons which are part of teachers’ daily programs, assessments and reporting schedules.

“The teacher decides the learning intentions and success criteria, makes them transparent to the students, demonstrates them by modelling, evaluates if they understand what they have been told by checking for understanding, and re-telling them what they have been told by tying it all together with closure”

Hattie, 2010, p. 49

Addressing critical learning needs and identifying hidden disabilities:

Insight Education benchmarks students across all aspects of their cognitive and neuropsychological learning including their social and emotional development. Insight’s Educational Needs Assessment (ENA) team delivers a contemporary assessment model designed to covers all aspects of Physical, Personal and Social, Interdisciplinary and Discipline based learning. All blind and vision impaired students currently attending mainstream schools are eligible to have an ENA completed by this team. The assessment audits how effective students’ educational settings are in meeting their diverse learning needs. The ENA provides a snapshot which identifies the strengths and weaknesses of each student’s individual learning style as well as their level of participation and achievement in the classroom. Insight Education works collaboratively with parents and mainstream
educators and assists Student Support Groups to better identify students’ current educational needs, evaluate if these are being met, and if not, how to utilise the ENA so that it is transformative in addressing each student’s particular issues.

“Victoria, state-wide, supports more than 500 students but all students are assessed through the Department of Education’s assessment centre and access services and support are provided through the department as well.”

Vision Education Scoping Report - Media Access Australia: March 2013

There must be more rigorous performance monitoring by specialist staff of all students who are blind and vision impaired which brings together initial assessments with ongoing formal/informal assessments if reliable and consistent data collection and interrogation is to be achieved.

The Department of Education and Training (DET) currently coordinates for students with a vision impairment (attending DET, independent or Catholic schools), a medical based Educational Vision Assessment (EVAC) to determine the nature and degree of the student’s vision impairment and establishes ‘eligibility for access to support and resources.’

Insight Education Centre for the Blind and Vision Impaired also coordinates for students across all sectors, an Educational Needs Assessment (ENA) to determine the ‘educational needs of those students.’ This is completed by a multi-disciplinary team of professionals which may include specialist teachers of the blind and vision impaired an orientation and mobility instructor, assistive technology consultant, educational welfare officer, speech pathologist, occupational therapist, educational/clinical psychologist, physiotherapist and paediatric ophthalmologist.

Whist the aim of EVAC is to identify adaptations required in the delivery of educational curriculum and/or the provision of learning materials in an accessible format, the ENA testing conducted by Insight provides an educational blueprint for parents with assessments that determine current levels of ability and needs across the Expanded Core Curriculum, Australian Curriculum, Functional Braille and/or Functional Vision, Social and Emotional learning and Orientation and Mobility skills. Assessments include an Orthoptic and Ophthalmologists ‘medical to educational’ report.

**RECOMMENDATION 3 for the review of the effectiveness of the Disability Standards in Education**

That for every referral made to EVAC, a parallel referral is made for students to complete an ENA (Educational Needs Assessment) coordinated by Insight Education.
Teacher training and capabilities:

Are mainstream teachers and their aides sufficiently trained and skilled to specialise in the support of blind and vision impaired students in mainstream school classrooms?

An issue which must be addressed, in respect to delivering a dual curriculum approach for blind or vision impaired students in a mainstream setting, is whether or not it is a reasonable expectation that mainstream teachers work to and deliver the AiTSL standards set for Teachers of the Blind and Vision Impaired i.e.

1. Fully accessible school programs
2. Participation in education on the same basis as students without disability
3. Curriculum that develops the skills, knowledge and understanding for blind and vision impaired students on the same basis as students without disability
4. Specialised services ensuring that all students participate in the educational activities for which they are enrolled

If Victoria and other States are to deliver the educational adjustments required to achieve these, then the obligations of education providers must include a full understanding, acceptance and acknowledgement that without specialist school support for mainstream staff and students it is simply not realistic to expect that The Standards will ever be properly met.

Are classroom teachers being provided with the required level of support and training from DET or from a specialist school specifically for blind and vision impaired students as is the case with other disabilities?

It is the intention of Insight Education, along with our strategic partners, to offer mainstream teachers and aides the professional development required to make reasonable adjustments to their programs. Whilst it will not address the core content of a sighted classroom, this will result in marked improvements to the level of inclusion these students currently have.

At Insight Education Centre, the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers of the blind and vision impaired are the foundation of all professional development, best practice and performance and the development of goals and reviews for all staff. The SPEVI Professional Standards were formulated to assist educators to provide equitable access and participation for children and youth with vision impairment, in accordance with Australia’s National Disability anti-discrimination legislation. The Standards elaborate upon the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2014)

http://icevi.org/pdf/2015_SPEVI_Prof_Std_for_Spec_Teachers_(VI).pdf
RECOMMENDATION 4 for the review of the effectiveness of the Disability Standards in Education

That Insight Education Centre, together with its strategic partners, is recognised as a central provider of specialist training and professional development for mainstream primary and secondary school staff in Victoria in relation to the education of blind and vision impaired students.

There exists at present the promise of what will happen in the mainstream classroom for blind and vision impaired students and the everyday reality. Mainstream classroom and specialist subject teachers are under significant pressure to provide an accessible curriculum (5 sessions a day - 25 sessions a week) for those students who are blind or vision impaired and attending their schools. The majority of teachers have limited access to support from specialist teachers of the blind and vision impaired, and little time to make reasonable adjustments to a classroom environment and the delivery of lessons which are predominately visual. There are, in most cases, very few in-class resources, particularly learning materials able to be prepared in large print or braille in time for the delivery of daily and weekly programs.

‘A major issue around in-class resources is lead times. With alternate format production time being measured in weeks rather than days or hours, it means that some resources or information found by a teacher at short notice (even the previous week) may not be able to be made accessible in time.’

Vision Education Scoping Report - Media Access Australia: March 2013

Sequential learning, with all materials available in an appropriate format, is essential for students who are blind or vision impaired if they are to access and fully participate in an education that fulfils the obligations of education providers, and addresses the rights of these students and their families in relation to their additional learning needs. Schools often cite restricted budgets and insufficient levels of, or lack of, disability funding, that makes impossible the necessary level of alternate format production.

Parents all too frequently find themselves in situations where they are advising school leadership and staff in mainstream settings as to how their child’s needs can be best accommodated, as well as reminding them of their obligations as educators to implement and meet The Standards.

Satellite school hubs in mainstream schools will significantly change the learning landscape for students who are blind or vision impaired. They are an extension of Insight Education Centre’s Berwick SPS campus and programs, offering the same dual curriculum for both
primary and secondary students. As early specialist education is of key importance, Prep students will be able to commence school in the satellite hub and move toward inclusion in mainstream classrooms and programs when they demonstrate readiness to do so. This educational model empowers students who are blind or vision impaired to fully access the Australian curriculum as well as the Expanded Core Curriculum.

The InsightOut satellite facility includes an open double classroom with individual work stations that accommodates 8 students, a specialist teacher and aide, and is fully equipped with accessible technology and specialised equipment to produce tactile/Braille or large print materials. It includes a life skills centre with kitchen, sensory playground and garden. The integration of the satellite program into all aspects of the host school’s programs and community life is an essential component of the model.

**RECOMMENDATION 5 for the review of the effectiveness of the Disability Standards in Education**

That the Department of Education & Training (DET) formalises a strategic agreement with Insight Education Centre to facilitate an effective model of explicit education for blind and vision impaired students to be delivered collaboratively with mainstream primary and secondary schools in Victoria.

In this way, teaching staff in mainstream settings will have better access to Insight teachers and aides who are in a position to provide ongoing specialist assistance for curriculum adaptation, technology, lesson planning and disability awareness of students who are blind and vision impaired, whilst gaining much needed access to specialist resources and professional development. Insight Education Centre can ensure that:

‘effective individualised support measures are provided in environments that maximise academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion.’

Article 24 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)

*Why should blind and vision impaired students in Victoria continue to be denied access to the best possible standard of education?*

If mainstream schools are to meet The Disability Standards for Education, then this is clearly not a reasonable or achievable expectation without the full support of, and partnership with, a specialist school and its staff, resources and expertise. If learning materials are not fully accessible for all lessons in a timely manner, then schools will continue to consistently fall short of providing equal access to the standard of education for blind and vision impaired students which their sighted peers enjoy.
A specialist school may be described as a select entry school with an educational model or pedagogy which directs specific attention and commitment to achieving the best possible learning outcomes in one or more particular fields of study. Such schools work to develop the skills and talents of their students, not only in order to achieve academic success, but to acquire the level of confidence in their abilities required to pursue the pathways to their chosen careers as they reach young adulthood and to fully participate in aspects of their lives.

Insight Specialist Primary School and its range of programs is a positive choice for the education of children who are blind or vision impaired. The bar is set high for every student within a model of educational excellence which incorporates a carefully planned transition to mainstream schooling when the time is right. There are options of dual enrolment placements or participation in outreach programs available to mainstream schools including satellite hubs soon to be established in K-12 mainstream schools across all four regions of Victoria over the next 12 to 18 months.

It is now time for educational providers across this State to take all steps necessary to ensure that blind and vision impaired students participate fully in their education, free from discrimination, and on the same basis as all other Victorian students. 'Best practice' must move from theory to a day by day expectation in every classroom and for every student.

Position Paper by Timothy Hemphill  (May 2015)
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*An Independent Specialist School