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Victorian Independent
Education Union
120 Clarendon St
Southbank, VIC 3006

Media Release
Tuesday 18 November

Vision Australia teachers warn closure plans place students at risk

Plans to close Victoria's only school for the blind and end Vision Australia's visiting teacher service will severely impact educational outcomes for more than 140 students currently accessing the services; according to Victorian Independent Education Union members who teach vision impaired students.

Specialist teachers and teacher aides, currently employed by Vision Australia, believe the planned closure will place students at risk and are calling on the State Government to commit to funding a new dedicated school for vision impaired children, and expand their existing visiting teacher service, beyond the end of next year.

Teachers and aides who are VIEU members have initiated an on-line petition in support of their call for Government funding. They plan to present the petition, which can be found at www.vieu.org.au, to Victorian Premier, John Brumby, Minister for Education, Bronwyn Pike, and Minister for Children and Early Childhood Development, Maxine Morand, prior to next year's budget.

Vision Australia Art Teacher and VIEU representative, Michael Donnelly, said: "The Victorian community has strongly supported the school for vision impaired children and associated educational programs for 142 years. We are certain that the community would not want this world-renowned educational facility to be lost to future generations."

Vision Australia announced two weeks ago that it would no longer provide or manage education services for children and that it would close its Education Centre at Burwood at the end of 2009. Responsibility for the education of students attending the school, or supported by Vision Australia's visiting teacher service, will be transferred to the State Government.

Mr Donnelly said: "The decision to close the school and visiting teacher service has been made by executives and bureaucrats without any proper consultation with educators. Victoria leads the nation in the provision of education services for vision impaired children and the closure of the Burwood Education Centre will eliminate education options for families; forcing all children into mainstream schools."

Vision Australia Classroom Teacher and VIEU member, Mrs Marg Pearce, said "While experienced specialist teachers of children with vision impairment support the principles of inclusion we do not believe that inclusion in mainstream schools is necessarily the best option for all students who are blind or have low vision, particularly students who have additional disabilities. Furthermore, all parents are entitled to choice in their child's school placement.

"The Vision Australia School has also been the most suitable placement for a student who is adventitiously blinded, as a result of an accident or health issues, and requires intensive specialist support. This level of support is not available in a mainstream setting."

Vision Australia's specialist teachers and aides are adamant that the closure of the school and the cessation of the Vision Australia Visiting Teacher service are not in the best interests of the students, as Vision Australia has claimed.

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Media statements made by Vision Australia have also significantly under-represented the 143 students and families impacted by the organisation's change in policy. While the school does provide direct service to 19 students, this does not accurately represent the numerous and flexible services currently provided by the Vision Australia Education Centre.

For example, for over 25 years the Education Centre has been involved in a Reverse Integration Program run with neighbouring St Scholastica's School. In the last few years, more partnerships (dual-enrolments) have also been developed with a number of Government and independent schools.

Vision Australia's highly-regarded Visiting Teacher service currently supports a further 74 students throughout the State. Visiting Teachers teach the students skills such as Braille and the use of adaptive technologies and support the local school to best meet the needs of each student.

More than 60 primary and secondary students (years 3 – 10) attend disability specific programs for educational sessions and social interaction with other students who are blind or have low vision. Mr Michael Donnelly, Vision Australia Art Teacher and VIEU member said: "This vital group interaction between students who are blind or have low vision will be lost with the closure of the school."

Vision Australia's existing educational programs are run by highly specialised teaching staff, all of whose positions are to be made redundant by the end of next year. The redundancies will result in the irreplaceable loss of expertise currently provided by 29 staff (specialist teachers, visiting teachers and teacher aides).

Vision Australia has stated that it will replace its existing highly successful educational programs with 'enhanced life skill programs'. In line with Vision Australia's new policy that 'education is not a core service', none of these new programs will be run by educators and no educators will be retained by the organisation after 2009.

Vision Australia teachers and aides have also deplored the lack of consultation with students, their families and other appropriate groups and individuals prior to the organisation's announcement of the planned closure of the school and cessation of the Visiting Teacher service.

Victorian Independent Education Union General Secretary, Deb James, said: "The World Health Organisation estimates that the number of blind or low vision Australians will double - from 300,000 to 600,000 people – within the next 12 years.

"However the decision to close this 142-year-old iconic institution was made without any consultation with students, parents, staff or the broader community. No responsible Government can permit such a significant reduction in education services," Ms James said.

At the time of Vision Australia's announced policy change, consultation and plans for the relocation of the Burwood Education Centre were well advanced. Vision Australia families, teachers and aides are now hoping that the Victorian community will again rally in support of the school and its visiting teacher service and help to ensure that the State Government provides appropriately for the continuation of this critical educational service.

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For more information or to arrange an interview please call Mandy Frostick on 0419 546 245.