

# Surviving Secondary School As A Blind student

**Secondary school is something everyone must survive; young people are stepping out of their familiar childhood surroundings, and into a completely new world.**

**Not only are they experiencing an academic change, but their personal priorities are changing, along with their social world.**

**As adolescents, our personal growth, maturity and sense of belonging become a dominant element in our lives, as we try to figure out our identity.**

**Changes on all fronts makes this period a tough road for all, however those who are blind or visually impaired have a few more obstacles to navigate.**

**These obstacles primarily present themselves in accessibility, inclusion, and social culture.**

**During this presentation, I hope to offer some advice on how to navigate these obstacles as best as one can, drawing on my experience as a blind secondary student.**

# Picking The Right School

- Choosing the right high school is key to beginning a smooth transition process.
- Each school option needs to be given a thorough assessment in order to be considered.
- Research and assessment of schools should begin mid to end of year five.
- Ultimately, as a parent, you want your child to attend an ideal school; somewhere that is willing to take on a blind/visually impaired student, is accessible, and can meet your child's needs.
- Be aware that this may come at a cost; it may not be the school that everyone else from the primary school will be attending, or that a sibling or family member is or will be attending.

# Picking The Right School (Cont)

- Visiting teachers, integration aides and students must all be involved in the assessment process; covering all ground, viewing the situation from all perspectives (student, support team, parents) will ease the difficulty that may arise over making a final decision.
- Visit each option, make staff aware of your exact situation.
- It is important that you make private appointments with principals and any other key staff to ask questions and/or tour the campus, as well as attending open and orientation days with potential student cohorts and parent groups.
- Make the acquaintance of anyone that may form your eventual support team.
- Consider each option carefully.
- Remember: This decision mustn't be rushed, make sure that everyone is clear and sure on which option is best.

# Factors To Consider and questions to ask

- Observe attitudes of staff at each potential school.
- Have they previously had a blind student attend? (not necessary to be the right option, but could assist in making a final decision)
- Am I, most importantly, as a parent, but equally as a member of the student's support team, happy?
- Does my child/student seem happy, comfortable and reassured when talking to staff, possibly a student, or touring the campus?
- Does this school offer programs that would be in the best interest of my child? (buddy/mentoring programmes, and/or other programs that may appeal to my child/student, debating, music programme, English competitions etc.).
- Most importantly, will this school help my child/student grow and become an active and independent member of the community?

# Vision Statements

- A vision statement is a statement prepared by a student and their support team, to be given to the school that has been chosen for the student to attend.
- Things to include:
  - Brief description of eye condition.
  - Student's general needs.
  - How they interact in a classroom setting.
  - What teachers will need to do to ensure that the student is able to participate fully in a class.
  - How best to ensure that a student has access to exactly what other students have, and is treated just like any other student would be at almost all times.

# Chosen High School Locked In, Preparation Time

- Attend the designated orientation day for all students that will be entering into year 7 the following year.
- Collect all school books beforehand, to be given to vision impairment education services to be transcribed into preferred format as soon as possible.
- Have visiting teacher run an in-campus professional development session for school staff, reinforcing and elaborating upon information included in the vision statement.
- Make sure the student's future teachers and the school well being officer are provided with a copy of the vision statement.
- As soon as possible, assist the student in running their own presentation session for their peers; it is best to keep this within the classroom group.
- The student will most likely be asked questions by both students and staff regarding their blindness, equipment, or how they can participate in school culture; encourage the student to answer these questions, but assure them that they do not have to answer anything that makes them feel uncomfortable.

# Working With Your Student As A Member Of Their Support Team

- The relationship between the student and their new support team is vital.
- Visiting teacher, parents, integration staff, well being officer and year coordinators.
- Although all are working together on behalf of the student, they must not smother them by making decisions for them; the student has a voice, and understands their needs.
- Encourage the student to voice any concerns or ideas that they have to improve their schooling experience.
- Make yourself approachable; don't speak down to the student, make them feel that they have made a valuable contribution.
- If possible, it is worthwhile for students to attend support team meetings, however if this is not possible, a discussion should take place between a support team member and the student, with any contributions and concerns noted and raised at the meeting. Once the student reaches senior school (years 10-12) consider providing a copy of the meeting minutes be given to the student.

# Technology And Equipment

- Determine whether any new equipment will need to be bought for the student once they are in secondary school.
- Make sure that they receive training with this equipment, if possible before the school year starts or soon thereafter.
- Electronic work must continually be backed up
- Basic troubleshooting skills must be gained so that the student does not fall too far behind.
- Contact details of assistive technology support staff/technicians should be saved in contact lists, even if they may not be needed too often.



# Don't Forget Braille!

- With laptop computers becoming more popular, and screen readers preferred over braille due to speed, students may not be able to regularly use braille at school.
- Despite this, remaining literate in braille is very important, and this skill must be maintained.
- This may involve work in the students own time.
- Possible ways in which students can maintain braille literacy skills include receiving a brailled magazine such as Just Kidding (transcribed by Vision Australia), establish a pen pal system with other braille-literate students, or if the child is musical, start learning braille music.
- However if a braille device can be used by the student, despite the slight slowness, it is a worthwhile investment.

# My Equipment

- Equipment that I have used:
- Braillenote Apex: Humanware
- Perkins brailler
- Jaws on Netbook laptop: Quantum technologies/freedom scientific
- Pearl camera and Openbook package on netbook laptop: Quantum technologies/freedom scientific
- Tactile drawing kit



# Communication With Teachers

- Direct communication with teachers is vital for all members of the support team and student; collect the student's teachers email addresses.
- The teacher will most likely be responsible for formatting the student's work, as electronic worksheets are becoming more popular.
- If something by chance needs to be embossed, or there is a high level of formatting to do which the teacher cannot manage, make sure they are aware and are seeking appropriate assistance from third parties'
- The student should be responsible for management of their own work; recommend that they carry flash drives so that the teacher may save formatted work, and check their school emails regularly as teachers may find it easier to email work.
- The student should advocate for themselves; if they cannot access something, or work is in the wrong format, they should approach the teacher and politely, but firmly explain the problem and how the teacher may resolve it in future.

# Classroom Interaction Tips

- Sitting up the front near the teacher allows the student to communicate quietly and quickly with the teacher if there are any difficulties, as they are both in earshot.
- Using a number system for all worksheets and other class files.
- Listening to the role call to become familiar with the names and voices of your classmates.
- Offering to be the scribe in a group situation so that you have an electronic copy of the work and students and teachers see that you are equal and capable as a class participant.
- Volunteering to read aloud during class reading time, may be slow, but is worthwhile for reasons as mentioned above.

# Advocacy

- At secondary school level, advocacy and having your own voice is essential, and students must learn this, as it is a vital part for their futures.
- When working on advocacy skills with students, focus on making polite requests/statements, but also focus on being firm.
- Particularly as a year seven student it is crucial that you learn to communicate something firmly, but not aggressively.
- You can say no; if you don't need help, you don't have to take it just because someone offers it to you.

# Social Skills Tips

- We could hold a whole separate presentation on social skills, but for now here are some things I found useful:
- Build rapport; even if they aren't your friends, try and interact with as many people as possible, ask their names, a few things about them, and let them ask about you.
- Join clubs and groups; you can easily form friendship groups, and those around you will respect you as it shows you are interested in giving back to the school community and are an equal to them.
- If there is something you know about topics studied, or if you can help someone in any way possible, don't hesitate in doing so.
- Adopt the "ask three before you ask me" principle.