

INQUIRY INTO STUDENTS WITH A DISABILITY OR SPECIAL NEEDS IN NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOLS

Organisation: Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect)

Date received: 21 February 2017

Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs in government and non-government schools in New South Wales.

Introduction

Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect) submits the following evidence to the General Purpose Standing Committee No.3 in relation to the education of students on the autism spectrum. The submission highlights the particular educational challenges faced by this substantial group of students.

Recent research has yielded childhood prevalence estimates for autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) of 1 in 100 in the UK (Baron-Cohen et al., 2009) and 1 in 68 in the USA (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). Extrapolated to the Australian context and on the basis of current population data (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016), the more conservative of these prevalence figures would suggest that around 57,000 Australian children aged 0 to 18 are on the autism spectrum, of whom over 18,000 live in New South Wales.

The high prevalence rates of ASDs amongst school-aged children highlight the urgent need for education providers to make available appropriate education provisions and ensure equal access to these services for all students on the autism spectrum.

Currently, Aspect operates eight schools in New South Wales and one school in South Australia for students on the autism spectrum. In addition to its 'main' school sites, the Aspect schools network includes 113 satellite classes hosted in mainstream New South Wales Department of Education (DEC), Catholic and Independent schools. Satellite classes are classes operated by Aspect that are located on the grounds of another school. In total there are approximately 1,100 students enrolled in Aspect schools in Sydney, the Hunter, Central Coast, South Coast, North Coast and Riverina areas of New South Wales and Adelaide in South Australia.

Aspect has developed and delivers a specialised educational program for school-age children on the autism spectrum: the Aspect Comprehensive Approach for Education (ACAE). The ACAE recognises the educational needs of all school-age children on the autism spectrum and provides an intensive specialist solution to these needs within a reasonable economic framework for both governments and carers. A summary of the ACAE is attached (Attachment 1).

A key feature of Aspect's educational approach is the transition of students to more inclusive educational settings. Within its schools, Aspect supports and reinforces the importance of educational inclusion by giving students the skills and structures that will enable them to function well in a mainstream environment. Aspect transitions approximately 20 per cent of its total student population annually to more inclusive settings. The Aspect Educational Outreach program supports the ongoing successful integration of young people in mainstream schools in partnership with families, educators and other professionals. The program's practical approach emphasises the importance of positive behaviour support and the development of learning, communication, social, and independent living skills.

In addition, Aspect enhances its transition programs with the provision of professional development to teachers and receiving schools in the successful education of students on the autism spectrum.

A number of research and evaluation projects have been completed that highlight very positive long-term outcomes for students exiting Aspect schools. An example of this is the "Where are they now? - A long-term follow-up study of students with autism graduating from Autism Spectrum Australia's (Aspect) satellite classes." (Keane, 2009) (Attachment 2)

We will now respond to the Terms Reference as set out in the invitation to submit evidence.

(a): Equitable access to resources for students with a disability or special needs in regional and metropolitan areas.

To support the complex educational needs of some students on the autism spectrum, a high level of funding is required from a range of sources.

All individuals on the autism spectrum are identified with (1) impairments in social communication and social interaction, (2) restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities, in some cases including hyper or hypo-reactivity to sensory input (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). People on the autism spectrum may possess relative strengths in visual-spatial processing, rote memory and attention to detail, yet experience difficulties with flexible thinking, planning and organisation.

As a result of these impairments and unique learning styles, students on the autism spectrum often experience significant challenges in environments where others are not aware of or responsive to their particular needs. As a result, many struggle in the education system, facing problems such as school exclusion, bullying, depression and anxiety, and are often misunderstood by educators, peers and the wider community (Spears & Campbell, 2008; Mayes et al., 2011; Ambitious About Autism, 2014; Costley et al., 2016).

Aspect schools use the Aspect Comprehensive Approach for Education (ACAE) as an intensive autism-specific education approach. The primary focus of Aspect schools is to equip students with the skills to become as independent as possible and to enable them to transition into the wider community wherever possible. Currently the average cost of educating a student in an Aspect school is approximately \$50,000 per annum. Income is derived from a combination of sources of government funding and parent contribution.

With the introduction of The Australian Education Act 2013, Aspect was hopeful that the new funding model would take into consideration the increased cost of operating a special school and reduce the contribution required from families, allowing them greater choice in the education options for their child with a disability.

The Australian Education Act 2013 funding model allowed for a base per student component (schooling resource standard, SRS) and then six loadings to address areas of disadvantage. The student with disability loading for non-government special schools was calculated at a loading rate of 223% of SRS per student with disability. This loading, along with all others, is being phased in over several years.

The school location loading, based on the Accessibility/Remote Index of Australia (ARIA), gives regional and remote schools a small loading per student.

The funding model was originally intended to include a transition period of six years from 2014 to 2019 to enable the full introduction of the new model, with the bulk of additional funding being available to schools in the last two years of the transition. The Coalition Government has only committed to the first four years (2014 to 2017). Schools will not receive their full entitlement under the model unless transition continues beyond 2017 (Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2016).

The basis of transition funding is a calculation of the difference between an estimate of what schools would have received under the previous funding arrangements (2013) and their funding entitlement under the new SRS funding model. Where a school is entitled to more funding under the SRS model, each year they receive a percentage of the difference ('additionality') (Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2016).

Based on funding received in 2013, Aspect schools were calculated to be 'above the SRS' as they would have received less funding under the SRS. So that such schools do not lose funding in real terms, the government provides an estimate of their funding entitlement under the previous Commonwealth funding model plus 3% indexation each year.

In principle, a model of funding which provides loadings to address disadvantage supports the education of students with disabilities. However, as Aspect schools are 'above the SRS', none of the loadings applies. Aspect schools receive only 3% indexation annually, which does not reflect the annual increased cost of running a school. Over the last decade, the school specific index average annual increase was over 5 per cent for both primary and secondary schools. (Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2017). Aspect schools are therefore trying to operate the same autism-specific intensive educational model that is needed by their students with less money in real terms.

Aspect remains committed to a needs based funding model to ensure that students on the autism spectrum have equitable access to schooling options in both metropolitan and regional areas.

(b) the impact of the Government's "Every Student Every School" policy on the provision of education to students with disability or special needs in NSW public schools.

As a non-government education provider, Aspect has no knowledge of the impact of this policy on government schools.

(c) developments since the 2010 Upper House inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs and the implementation of its recommendations.

The majority of recommendations apply to internal operations within government schools, of which Aspect has no knowledge. Recommendation 1 and 2 refer to funding for students with disabilities. Aspect has given a response on funding in the response to Term of Reference (a) below.

Recommendation 26 refers to the inclusion of Life Skills as an essential component of the new national curriculum. Aspect schools supported this recommendation and continue to use the Life Skills Curriculum to great advantage for some of our students.

Recommendation 28 refers to embedding special education throughout pre service teacher training. Aspect would continue to support the embedding of special education throughout pre-service teacher training. Currently Aspect provides extensive ongoing professional development to all staff to ensure their understanding and implementation of the Aspect Comprehensive Approach for Education (ACAE) as the best special education approach for students with autism spectrum disorder.

(d) complaint and review mechanisms within the school systems in NSW for parents and carers.

Aspect is committed to having well established and continually reviewed complaint and review mechanisms as part of its person-centred, human rights based approaches and in accordance with state and national legislative and standards requirements. Aspect welcomes and values feedback about the quality, provisions and accessibility of its service and communications to support the continuous quality improvement of services and management.

The complaint and review mechanisms at Aspect are illustrated throughout the Aspect policy documentation framework, with clear instructions for staff about when to engage in feedback and complaints reporting, management processes and review processes. These complaint and review mechanism directives are illustrated in Aspect's overarching policies, which apply to the whole organisation, namely:

- Quality Management Framework policy (Attachment 3);

- Stakeholder and Community Engagement policy (Attachment 4);
- Safeguarding the People We Support policy (Attachment 5).

These policies are publicly available on the Aspect website. All families enrolling in Aspect schools are provided with summaries of the Aspect policies and full copies of the policies on request.

The **Quality Management Framework** policy outlines Aspect's commitment to quality, the Aspect principles that guide the quality framework, and the national and state legislative and standards requirements that Aspect adheres to, regardless of service type. This policy outlines the approach to valuing, seeking and utilising feedback (principle 3); the sensitive and timely resolution of complaints with due respect for privacy and opportunities for improvement to service provisions (principle 4); and the consistent and thorough methodology for ongoing continuous quality improvement that is reviewed and accountable (principles 6, 10 and 11).

The **Stakeholder and Community Engagement** policy details Aspect's work to establish and consolidate collaborative relationships with all key stakeholders, recognising that effective communication and the sharing of skills, knowledge and experience with these stakeholders and the broader community is essential to achieve optimal outcomes for people on the spectrum. Within this framework, people using Aspect schools (adult, child, or young person, with or without a disability) are supported to feel safe to engage in the feedback and complaint mechanisms of Aspect without fear of retribution, and with the involvement of information, assistance, advocacy or support services where desired.

The **Safeguarding the People We Support** policy demonstrates Aspect's considered duty of care and commitment to providing a safe and secure environment for people on the spectrum that is free from abuse and neglect, as well as appropriately responding to and preventing incidents of abuse, injury, neglect and exploitation of the people it supports. This policy provides the overarching framework that captures all elements of forming and sustaining an organisation-wide 'Culture of Safety & Wellbeing' – a framework made up of key Aspect principles, policies and procedures including effective complaint handling, a culture of reporting, upholding human rights, and regular audits and review.

The policy is managed by the Aspect Safeguarding the People We Support Committee. When first established in 2013, the Committee was tasked with the review of Aspect's policies and practices due to two major drivers: (i) an issues paper by Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYPDA) entitled 'Enabling and protecting: proactive approaches to addressing the abuse and neglect of children and young people with disability' (2012); (ii) the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Initial findings of the Safeguarding Committee highlighted that whilst an extensive range of policies and practices were already embedded within Aspect schools that provide for a safe and secure environment, there was a need to continuously review, monitor and improve these practices. The committee has since expanded to review all Aspect services' safeguarding frameworks, inclusive of services to adults on the autism spectrum. Each element is addressed by Aspect within the context of the Committee, which reports to the organisation's Quality Management Reviews, to ensure the safeguarding and wellbeing of students in Aspect schools is being upheld, advise of continuous improvement, and continually invest in how the voices of the students can be promoted and enabled across Aspects schools.

At the operational level, staff are guided by the following procedures and work instructions to report and manage feedback and complaints:

- **Acknowledging & Recording Complaints and Feedback** (Attachment 6). Provides step by step instructions for staff on the receiving end of feedback and complaints, including detailing all the methods that a person may provide feedback and complaints, and the signs to watch for where the feedback or complaint may be communicated through behaviour.
- **Complaints Management Process** (Attachment 7). Provides a transparent framework for promptly and sensitively addressing and resolving complaints and disputes that may arise regarding procedural fairness, confidentiality and privacy. These procedures are engaged

by supervisory and management staff who are responsible for complaints management, and include the requirements for engagement of external complaint investigative bodies.

- **Critical Incident & Complaint Investigation Process** (Attachment 8). Provides step by step instructions for all complaints and critical incident investigation processes, including ensuring fair process, confidentiality and clear communication requirements. These instructions are utilised by the supervisory and management staff who are responsible for complaints management.
- **Utilising Feedback** (Attachment 9). Provides a framework for continuously, promptly and sensitively collecting and using feedback to inform continuous improvement, including the development of a transparent and respectful service culture that encourages open and honest communication. These procedures are used by supervisory and management staff who are responsible for ensuring stakeholder consultation, feedback collection and continuous quality improvement within their service provision.
- Each Aspect school has a **staff handbook**, which complies with Aspect policy, procedures and work instructions whilst relating to the specific school site context. These handbooks are to be used by all school staff after receiving training in the relevant policies, procedures and work instructions for site-specific instructions (e.g. storage, access and reporting lines for complaints management).

Aspect staff receive training in complaints acknowledgement and reporting, with relevant staff positions additionally receiving training and support for complaints handling and management in accordance with the Complaints Management Process and related instructions.

All information collected through feedback and complaints management, including corrective actions, trends in issues identified and quality improvement initiatives, are reviewed at Aspect's Quality Management Review, which oversees the effectiveness of Aspect's Quality Management Framework policy. The Continuous Quality Improvement procedures (Attachment 10) detail how the information collected informs the quality management review process to monitor compliance with Aspect's policy documentation framework and oversight of all quality and compliance related issues at Aspect. This includes the use of reviewing data received by internal and external audits and reviews, as detailed in Aspect's Internal & External Audit procedure (Attachment 11).

Further to the policy framework documentation and associated training for Aspect's quality management, feedback and complaints and safeguarding processes, Aspect staff also receive regular training in a number of related areas that strengthen Aspect's commitment to working with families and their right to complain about an Aspect interaction without fear of retribution. These include:

- **Aspect Code of Conduct** (Attachment 12). Outlines professional conduct expected of all staff regardless of position.
- **Positive Behaviour Support Policy** (Attachment 13). Details the principles of a PBS approach and how this is engaged across the whole organisation to work in respectful collaboration with individuals and their families. Aspect's PBS approach involves using effective evidence-based strategies to increase the quality of opportunities for the student to engage in meaningful participation.
- **Incidents Procedures** (Attachment 14). Informs staff of how to capture any incidents as part of taking all appropriate steps to maintain an effective risk management program in order to minimise the impacts of any incident or critical incident. This includes the mechanisms for review, corrective and preventive actions and quality improvements.

Aspect also undergoes a number of external audits, including the NSW Education Standards Authority's (NESA) school registration process, and submits to the Third Party Verification (TPV) against the NSW Disability Service Standards (NSW DSS) in accordance with the Ageing, Disability & Home Care (ADHC) quality policy each funding period. The NSW DSS includes Standard 4: Feedback and Complaints, which requires the comprehensive review of Aspect's feedback and complaint mechanisms as part of the verification process, and Standard 6: Service Management, which has practice requirements for effective governance and quality management systems that must also be thoroughly evaluated at each verification.

Conclusion

With their unique patterns of impairment and learning characteristics, many children on the autism spectrum experience significant challenges in educational environments.

No one single approach will be effective for all students across the autism spectrum. Therefore, a range of educational programs and services are required to meet the needs of this unique population of Australian students. It is the responsibility of both government and non-government education providers to offer appropriate educational services and supports.

As stated in the above response to Term of Reference (a), equitable access to resources for students on the autism spectrum has still not been achieved in regional and metropolitan areas, nor have parents been given greater choice in the education options for their child with a disability.

For some period in their school life, students on the autism spectrum may need an intensive autism-specific program. The Aspect Comprehensive Approach for Education (ACAE) is an evidence-informed teaching methodology for students on the autism spectrum. The ACAE acknowledges that within a set of standard procedures and core curriculum, different teaching tools, interventions and techniques may be used at different times during a child's development. The approach also recognises the transactional and interactive nature of autism, whereby the learning environment, curriculum, and persons interacting with the individual all influence their development (Prizant et al., 2003).

As stated in the above response to Term of Reference (d), Aspect is committed to treating complaints seriously, sensitively and in a timely manner, having due regard to procedural fairness, confidentiality and privacy. Aspect has recently improved the policy framework to provide a comprehensive system as the foundations to manage complaints from parents and carers. Aspect agrees to learn from such experiences and to continue to develop and refine its practices.

References

- Ambitious About Autism (2014). *Ruled Out: Why are children with autism missing out on education?*
https://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/sites/default/files/Ruled_Out_Report.pdf,
accessed 15 February 2017.
- American Psychiatric Association (2013). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5)*. Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2016). Australian Demographic Statistics. Cat. No. 3101.0. Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- Baron-Cohen, S., Scott, F.J., Allison, C., Williams, J., Bolton, P. Matthews, F.E. & Brayne, C. (2009). Prevalence of autism-spectrum conditions: UK school-based population study. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 194, 500–509.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2014). 2016 Autism Prevalence Update. <https://www.autismspeaks.org/news/news-item/cdc-update-autism-shows-gap-between-early-concerns-and-evaluation>, accessed 14 February 2017.
- Costley, D., Baldwin, S., Bruck, S., Haas, K., & Ritzrow, K. (2016). *Shining a Light on the Autism Spectrum: The Experiences and Aspirations of Adults*. London: Routledge.
- Keane, E., (2009) *Where are they now? A long-term follow-up study of students with autism graduating from Autism Spectrum Australia's (Aspect) satellite classes*.
<https://www.autismspectrum.org.au/sites/default/files/PDFuploads/Research%20Insights%20News%20Iss%201-LR.pdf>
- Independent Schools Council of Australia (2016). Independent Update, Issue 3: The SRS Funding Model. <http://isca.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/2016-Independent-Update-3-The-SRS-Funding-Model.pdf>, accessed 14 February 2017.
- Independent Schools Council of Australia (2017) Principles of School Funding. <http://isca.edu.au/about-independent-schools/principles-for-school-funding/> accessed 17 February 17
- Mayes, S., Calhoun, S., Murray, M., Ahuja, M., & Smith, L. (2011). Anxiety, depression, and irritability in children with autism relative to other neuropsychiatric disorders and typical development. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 5, 474–485.
- Prizant, B., Wetherby, A., Rubin, E., & Laurent, A. (2003). The SCERTS model: A transactional, family-centred approach to enhancing communication and socioemotional abilities of children with autism spectrum disorder. *Infants and Young Children*, 16, 296–316.
- Robinson, S. (2012). Enabling and Protecting: Proactive approaches to addressing the abuse and neglect of children and young people with disability. www.cda.org.au/enabling-and-protecting
- Spears, B., & Campbell, A. (2008). *Behind the Scenes: Insights into the human dimension of covert bullying* (Short Report). Hawke Research Institute for Sustainable Societies/Centre for the Analysis of Educational Futures.
https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/behind_the_scenes_-_insights_into_the_human_dimension_of_covert_bullying_-_final_short_report.pdf,
accessed 15 February 2017.

Attachment List

1. Aspect Comprehensive Approach for Education (ACAE)
2. Where are they now? - A long-term follow-up study of students with autism graduating from Autism Spectrum Australia's (Aspect) satellite classes
3. Quality Management Framework policy
4. Stakeholder and Community Engagement policy
5. Safeguarding the People We Support policy
6. Acknowledging & Recording Complaints and Feedback
7. Complaints Management Process
8. Critical Incident & Complaint Investigation Process
9. Utilising Feedback
10. Continuous Quality Improvement procedures
11. Aspect's Internal & External Audit procedure
12. Aspect Code of Conduct
13. Positive Behaviour Support Policy
14. Incidents Procedures

Elizabeth Gadek
National Director, Aspect Education
Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect)
P O Box 361, Forestville NSW 2087

20 February 2017.