

**Submission  
No 31**

**INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH  
DISABILITY IN NEW SOUTH WALES EDUCATIONAL  
SETTINGS**

**Organisation:** Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect)

**Date Received:** 29 February 2024

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## Working together for inclusive education system in NSW

Aspect's Submission to the NSW Legislative Council's  
**Inquiry into Children and young people with disability in NSW  
educational settings**

February 2024

**a different brilliant<sup>®</sup>**  
understanding, engaging & celebrating the  
strengths, interests & aspirations  
of people on the autism spectrum

*"Aspect has always been at the forefront of meeting the needs of students in our community, embracing innovative approaches and striving for continuous improvement, they are responsive to the individual students needs and actively work towards ways of making positive school experiences a part of their everyday practice. So many families' lives have changed as a result of the work that Aspect does by delivering quality programs that see young students who become successful adults playing key roles in our community."*

**- Judy Brewer AO**

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## About Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect)

Aspect is a not-for-profit organisation that is over fifty years strong. We are one of Australia's largest autism-specific service providers and operate one of the largest autism-specific school programs in the world. Passionately committed to inclusion, Aspect partners with people of all ages on the autism spectrum and their families to deliver evidence-informed solutions, services and practices. Aspect's Research Centre for Autism Practice (ARCAP) identifies real-world issues for research and accelerates timely solutions and evidence-based practice and strategies to improve the everyday lives of Autistic people and their families.

### Autism-specific education is our speciality

- We are an approved education system authority with nine schools registered as a 'school of kind' in NSW and a 'combined' school in South Australia.
- There are 113 Aspect satellite classes (autism-specific classrooms) in NSW mainstream (primary and secondary) school settings. These are hosted in the grounds of state, Catholic and independent schools, as well as two university campuses.
- We provide programs and partnerships (including professional training and development) for mainstream schools to better support and enable Autistic students to engage in learning and improve life outcomes. Aspect run the nationally funded [Positive Partnerships](#) program that engages whole school communities, including a specific emphasis on First Nations communities.
- We deliver Australia's first autism-specific distance education program.
- We are leaders and partners in education related research. Current projects include: Exploring the Zones of Regulation in Aspect classrooms; Trauma-informed positive education in an autism-specific setting; Uni Life post-secondary education program for Autistic young people with intellectual disability and Work Education practices.

### Our education team:

- Aspect employs over 860 teaching staff.
- All staff undertake specialist training and ongoing PD in Aspect Comprehensive Approach (ACA).
- Transdisciplinary teams of educators and allied health professionals collaboratively design and deliver a range of therapy supports and specific strategies matched to individual student needs.

### Our students:

- Our current enrolments include more than 1200 Autistic students aged 4 to 17 years, in NSW and SA.
- Most have a level 3 autism diagnosis, some level 2. Many have additional co-occurring conditions.
- 50% of our students attend main Aspect school campus programs and 50% attend satellite programs located in mainstream schools.
- We educate a high representation of First Nations students (6.2% of all enrolments; 24% in Port Macquarie; 12% in Hunter; 11% Central Coast School).
- Students come from households speaking over 30 community languages.

### Our model:

- Underpinned by the ACA that is informed by our investment in research and research into practice translation
- Designed to enable transitions to - and integration with - mainstream education settings
- Highly tailored, and individualised approach to meet individual student needs
- Purpose designed built environments that incorporate Autistic community input
- Innovative approach to assessing teaching and underpinned by our shared belief that 'every child can and will learn with the right supports at the right time.'

## Overview: key points

- **Major reviews and resulting policy changes will dramatically reshape** the relationship between children and young people with disabilities and the NSW education system.
- These changes will result in **reduced access to NDIS supports** – particularly for Autistic children and young people - along with **higher expectations for schools to become more inclusive and supportive**. This creates important opportunities and challenges for the NSW education system.
- **Inclusion is a practice, not a physical setting**. Inclusive education is not achieved by grouping all students together in the same settings, all the time.
- **Phasing out specialist settings would be high risk, divisive, and not reflective of the evidence or experience of what works**. Research from England has linked reducing the number of specialist schools with higher rates of school exclusion for Autistic children.
- An inclusive and supportive education system requires a **range of educational settings and provisions**, ranging from specialist schools to support classes in mainstream settings (including autism-specific satellite classes ) to full mainstream school placement.
- Aspect's experience is that **some Autistic students require a level of accommodations, adjustments, personalisation and tailoring that very few mainstream schools are equipped to provide**.
- We also know that **autism specialist education settings can help Autistic students to achieve their potential** in educational attainment and to become as independent as possible. 90% of families in Aspect's specialist education settings say their child's needs are fully met and research shows that specialist schools have higher retention rates than mainstream schools.
- Given that 90% of students with disability attend a mainstream school, **the major focus needs to be on transformative change to build inclusion in mainstream settings**. This will require marked change at multiple levels: policy, programs, funding, data, reporting, accountabilities, workforce capabilities and culture, pedagogy and community attitudes.
- **NSW schools and teachers need practical help** to develop teaching practices, adaptations to curriculum and assessment methods, behaviour supports and enabling environments that can support diverse learners and reduce the need for exclusionary practices. This takes more than access to web-based resources or a one-off professional development session. Deep and reciprocal partnerships with high quality specialist providers would help to rapidly build capacity and capability.
- Schools often struggle to understand and meet the Disability Standards for Education. NSW could help change this situation by giving school's much **clearer guidance on processes and examples that can help them to better meet their reasonable adjustment obligations**, including autism-relevant adjustments would help to change this.
- Schools and early learning centres are set to become key delivery locations for anticipated Foundation Supports (Early Intervention) that will replace NDIS support for many children. **NSW needs to make a coherent and coordinated contribution to the Foundational Support Strategy that is being developed**. A new advisory body that includes autism expertise could help build this contribution and inform implementation.
- With the right policy, program and regulatory settings, **specialist education providers and settings can - and indeed should - play a major role in building a more inclusive education system**. From co-location and cross-enrolment, to partnerships and innovation funds, there are a range of simple and practical ways to link the skills and expertise of the specialist sector with the new needs of mainstream schools in NSW.

## Recommendations

### An inclusive education system offering a range of different settings

1. Articulate a clear, cross-party vision for an inclusive education system in NSW that comprises a continuum of high-quality settings and options that enable all children and young people with disability to engage in learning and school life fully, safely and equitably.

This continuum needs to include specialist schools and settings (including autism-specific settings) that are connected with mainstream schools and community life.

### Rapidly build the capacity and capability of mainstream schools to improve inclusion

2. Provide specialist coaching and support to build the capability of schools and teachers to deliver differentiated teaching practices and make curriculum and assessment adaptations.
3. Invest in building system-wide capability in positive behaviour support. This will help to reduce the use of disciplinary exclusions and restrictive practices.
4. Develop clear and practical guidance for NSW schools on implementing reasonable adjustments. This should incorporate guidance on autism-specific adjustments.

### Effective new supports and support approaches

5. Establish an advisory group of key stakeholders to inform the design and implementation of Foundation Supports (Early Intervention) in NSW. Changes to NDIS eligibility will mean many children with developmental delay and disability (including some on the autism spectrum) will be reliant on this new program of support.
6. Incorporate autism-expertise into future school hubs that are anticipated to bring education, disability and community supports together.

### Specialist settings with strong connections to mainstream schools and life

7. Set expectations, in NSW policy and programs, for specialist settings to be connected to mainstream education, employment and community life.
8. Establish a fund (as recommended by the Better and Fairer Education System Review) to support innovations that test different modes of delivery, staffing, and governance frameworks (including networks of schools between settings and sectors).
9. Make provision for the incorporation of specialist settings - including autism specific settings - in the development of education precincts and major new school developments.
10. Promote and incentivise innovative partnerships between specialist settings and mainstream schools to build capability and connections.
11. Adjust funding mechanisms to enable concurrent enrolment in schools across different systems, including between specialist independent and mainstream schools.

## Context: we face a significant turning point

### An important Inquiry at a significant time: major changes are coming

Aspect welcomes and commends the Legislative Council's Inquiry into access and achievement levels for children and young people with disabilities in the NSW education system.

This Inquiry comes at a critical time, with the confluence of a number of landmark reviews that are setting new and substantial reform directions. Although government responses to recommended changes are still being worked through, there are significant common and mutually reinforcing directions across the [Disability Royal Commission](#)<sup>1</sup> (unanimous recommendations); the [NDIS Review](#)<sup>2</sup> and the [Better and Fairer](#) Education System Review (expert panel established by Commonwealth, State and Territory Education Ministers to inform the next intergovernmental schools' agreement).<sup>3</sup>

Aspect believes the combined directions of anticipated reforms are overwhelmingly positive. We are mindful however, that translation, design and implementation of the resulting changes will occur over an extended period, traverse multiple levels and portfolios of government, and will require transformational changes in education (particularly schools) and disability services.

Being on the precipice of such significant change, and not knowing what this will mean in practice, is understandably causing concern and questions among NSW's Autistic and autism communities.

Aspect is looking to the NSW parliament - starting with this Inquiry - to build a strong cross-party commitment to clearly, constructively and diligently championing and steering reform opportunities into the realisation of positive, practical and measurable change for Autistic students, and more broadly for all students with disability.

### Autistic students will be significantly impacted by upcoming changes

Aspect anticipates that the national reform directions will markedly impact the education and disability landscape for students with developmental delay or disability – and especially for Autistic children, young people and their families and carers.

- **There will be a reduced flow of children and young people into the NDIS** with a national funding growth cap on the Scheme from 2026. The overwhelming majority of younger participants on the NDIS are Autistic.
- **Supports for children and young people not on the NDIS will be expanded.** Targeted foundation supports will be established, including for Early Intervention and transitions. Early education and school settings are intended as a key delivery site. Autistic children and young people will likely comprise a major cohort for these supports.
- **Requirements and accountabilities for schools to be inclusive and accessible will increase significantly.** Success of the policy reform environment is contingent on schools and early learning providers stepping up in the way they include and support children and young people with developmental delay and disability. Change directions include:
  - strengthened data, funding and reporting requirements regarding disability related resourcing
  - development of a national roadmap for education inclusion – backed by indicators

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<sup>1</sup> Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, Final Report, 2023

<sup>2</sup> Independent Review into the NDIS, Final Report: *Working together to deliver the NDIS*, 2023

<sup>3</sup> Australian Government Department of Education, Improving Outcomes for All, The Report of the Independent Expert Panel's Review to Inform a [Better and Fairer](#) Education System, Oct 2023

- strengthening rights-based approaches including new legislation and oversight mechanisms; lifting the bar on accountability for implementation of the [Disability Standards for Education](#); entitlement to local school enrolment; and a focus on reducing disciplinary exclusions.
- **Uplifting the capacity and capability of schools and workforce** to improve disability inclusion is a priority.
- **Integration of education, disability and community supports through schools as hubs is favoured.** Early learning and schools are slated to serve as community and service hubs (sometimes referred to as full-service schools).
- **Support for post-school transitions is to be overhauled** including through increased expectations regarding vocational education and work exposure; targeted foundation support and the (further) reform of NDIS funded supports for school leavers (SLES).

### **Performance of NSW education system will be critical to the success of reforms**

The success of proposed reform directions – and the resulting impact on the lives of Autistic children and young people and their families – is heavily reliant on genuine inclusion and significant, effective supports being delivered through the school system.

While recognising that much work is taking place between governments across Australia, this submission seeks to highlight opportunities for the NSW Parliament and Government to commence the considerable groundwork necessary to prepare for and steer change.

Collectively, we must work together to maximise reform benefits. At the same time, we urge the NSW Parliament and Government to be vigilant in ensuring transition risks are minimised and that Autistic children and young people experience improved outcomes from upcoming changes.



## Inclusive education depends on a continuum of different settings and offers

**Recommendation: an inclusive education system offering a range of different settings**

- 1. Articulate a clear, cross-party vision for an inclusive education system in NSW that comprises a continuum of high-quality settings and options that enable all children and young people with disability to engage in learning and school life fully, safely and equitably.**

**This continuum needs to include specialist schools and settings (including autism-specific settings) that are connected with mainstream schools and community life.**

The following descriptions of inclusive education serve as an important reminder of what we are collectively working towards.

### **Inclusive education defined**

“Inclusive education fosters respect and embraces the differences, diversity and inherent dignity of people with disability. It supports acceptance and inclusion throughout life, including in employment, community living and community participation.

An inclusive schooling system should aim to ensure that students with disability access and participate in learning and extracurricular activities to the greatest extent they can and on an equal basis with their peers. This means:

- students with disability can access, contribute and participate to the maximum extent in all aspects of the life of their school
- all school environments are welcoming and safe, instil high expectations and aspirations, and are free from violence, abuse and neglect
- school supports are effective and meet the diversity of student needs
- students with disability achieve individual educational goals in and beyond school
- students with disability develop social skills and maximise their capacity to make choices
- the attitudes and behaviour of students, teachers, principals and educational authorities show they embrace diversity and the inclusion of students and teachers with disability.

A truly inclusive education system benefits students with and without disability by:

- adjusting teaching to the strengths, requirements and learning style of each student
- providing agency by responding to the preferences and desires of each student
- building social connections, both at school and for later life.”

**- Disability Royal Commission 2023**

“Inclusive education means every student with disability receives “an education enabling them to achieve their full potential, which includes getting access to any support and educational adjustments required. Inclusive education supports all students to engage in school genuinely and fully by adapting the environment and teaching practices for each student.”

**- Better and Fairer Education System Review 2023**

“All students, regardless of disability, ethnicity, socio-economic status, nationality, language, gender, sexual orientation or faith, can access and fully participate in learning, alongside their similar aged peers, supported by reasonable adjustments and teaching strategies tailored to meet their individual needs. Inclusion is embedded in all aspects of school life, and is supported by culture, policies and everyday practices.”

**- NSW Inclusive Education Statement for Students with Disability**

These visions for inclusive education are *not* going to be achieved by grouping all students together in the same setting. Rather, fostering and stewarding a continuum of high-quality education settings and offers, so that children, young people and their families can find a setting that matches their needs and circumstances is vital.

Half of the Disability Royal Commissioners (including the Chair) concluded that a commitment to inclusive education and the presence of specialist settings are not in conflict. This view has been widely endorsed since the DRC reported and is aligned with the broader consensus on the critical and ongoing role of specialist settings in an inclusive education system.

These DRC Commissioners cited submissions received from the NSW Government that astutely characterised inclusion as a practice, rather than a physical setting. This characterisation situates specialist settings as an essential part of “an inclusive and flexible system of supports, guided by the goals of maximising student outcomes, enabling parent/carer choice, and constantly adapting to reflect the best available evidence”.<sup>4</sup>

Aspect agrees with the view put to the DRC by NSW that “a State Party will meet its [international human rights] obligations through an education system that allows for funding of different education modalities so students with disability are able to participate in a range of education options, including: enrolment in mainstream classes in mainstream schools with additional support; specialist classes or units in mainstream schools; and specialist schools as is appropriate.”<sup>5</sup>

Our experience has shown that some Autistic students with high support needs require significant levels of accommodations and adjustments that very few mainstream schools are equipped to provide. Without specialist settings, they will be denied access to the curriculum and life skills needed for subsequent economic and social inclusion. For such students, engagement in a highly specialised program is an effective prerequisite for inclusion in the broader community.

Accordingly, a truly inclusive model must incorporate and recognise the benefits of a range of educational settings and provisions. For an Autistic student, this might be an autism-specific specialist school, a small support or satellite class staffed by autism-specialist teachers in a mainstream school, access to an autism-specific itinerant teacher service to support engagement in mainstream classes and full mainstream school placement.

### **High quality specialist settings offer many benefits with students with high support needs**

The recent report of the Better and Fairer Education System Review profiled the benefits of dedicated specialist classrooms and specialist schools in advancing disability inclusion, as extracted below.

#### **Inclusive education case studies: Better and Fairer Education System Review**

A remote government primary school, which serves as a regional hub for students with disability. The school offers an education support program providing highly individualised learning to students with diagnosed disabilities. It has a dedicated classroom with a high teacher-student ratio staffed by people with experience and expertise in disability. The classroom is adapted (as best possible, given limited infrastructure) to meet the sensory and physical needs of students, and all students are receiving evidence-based teaching and learning tailored to the needs of students with disability. The model is so successful that families are relocating hundreds of kilometres to enrol their children and the school is in danger of exceeding capacity without further investment and

<sup>4</sup> DRC [Final report Volume 7 Part A](#); citing Submissions by the State of New South Wales in response to Counsel Assisting’s submissions in Public hearing 24, undated, SUBM.0041.0001.0229, [7–8].

<sup>5</sup> DRC [Final report Volume 7 Part A](#); citing Submissions by NSW

staffing: the infrastructure is old and was never fit for purpose, and finding qualified staff remains a challenge.

The Panel visited special schools such as a metropolitan government special education school. It was evident that by having a large number of students with specific needs, the school is able to pool and scale resources, so students benefit from having a fully accessible playground, hydrotherapy pools and therapeutic rooms. The school attracts staff with expertise in and passion for teaching students with special needs, making it very likely that students will consistently get the support and pedagogy that will support them.

Specialised, high quality education settings can offer distinct advantages for some Autistic students, delivering a positive education experience not available via mainstream schools, that provides the best opportunity for them to achieve and thrive.

Aspect's education settings are underpinned by the Aspect Comprehensive Approach (ACA) - an evidence-based approach for autism-inclusion in education. The goal is to equip students with the skills that enable them to become as independent as possible and to prepare them to succeed in the wider community. Our approach:

- ✓ is grounded in a deep understanding of autism-related enablers and challenges.
- ✓ is staffed by a transdisciplinary team of educators and allied health professionals trained and practiced at delivering autism specific strategies and adjustments.
- ✓ engages the student, parents, teachers and other professionals in developing an individual plan with a focus on quality of life. The plan highlights the student's learning style, unique strengths, preferences and interests. It identifies targeted education goals and outlines strategies to be used within a positive learning environment to help achieve those goals.
- ✓ is delivered in small and purpose-built environments to support sensory needs.
- ✓ has small class sizes with low student-staff ratios. Highest and complex needs students are placed in very small learning groups.
- ✓ selects groups of students that can work effectively together.
- ✓ is autism positive and fosters a strong sense of identity, belonging and community to strengthen mental health and wellbeing.
- ✓ is heavily focussed on skill development to prepare for successful transition into mainstream settings.
- ✓ addresses the heightened vulnerabilities of Autistic people. For example, Autistic females face higher risk (33% more likely to be victims) of sexual assault. Our So Safe program tackles this.
- ✓ supports, connects and builds community amongst families with schools operating as hubs for students, their parents, staff and the wider community.

**Families in Aspect's specialist settings report positive experiences:<sup>6</sup>**

- Over 90% agree that their child's needs are fully met with teaching and learning approaches that are tailored to them individually.
- Nearly 80% report having opportunities to get the support they need and connect with a community where they can network, learn and be accepted.

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<sup>6</sup> Aspect Education, Perspectives: Your School In Focus (bi-annual stakeholder surveys). Unpublished. Available by request.

*My son benefits from a wealth of expertise in autism research and education, and tailored supports inconceivable in mainstream settings. He is one of six kids in a class, taught by a passionate teacher and full-time assistant teacher. They use direct communication, visual supports and sensory aids. They work on therapeutic and developmental goals, not just educational ones.*

*Crucially, when my son is dysregulated, his teachers have the expertise and appropriate student load to respond with care, skill and patience.*

Parent voices, Aspect

### **Data shows higher retention rates for students in specialist settings (but better data is needed)**

The DRC produced a dedicated research paper: [Outcomes associated with 'inclusive', 'segregated' and 'integrated' settings](#) (March 2023). Referring to this paper in its final report, it noted there has been very limited data collection and analysis on the effects of specialist education settings on outcomes for people with disability. Based on the limited available information from government jurisdictions, it noted that retention rates are better in specialist schools than in mainstream schools reporting:<sup>7</sup>

- Year 12 retention rates are lower for students with disability in mainstream schools than those for students without disability.
- Year 12 retention rates for students in specialist schools are generally higher than those for students without disability in mainstream schools.

NSW data is very limited, with the Department's [benchmarking of literacy and numeracy precursors](#) for students with disability still in an early phase.<sup>8</sup> Aspect is using these indicators to monitor student development and learning, supplemented by our own purpose designed tools.

Overwhelmingly Aspect's experience is that students coming to us achieve markedly better outcomes than they did in their previous school setting/s,<sup>9</sup> as highlighted by the vignettes below.

When Archie\* transitioned from a mainstream into an Aspect school, he found the environment difficult to manage and kept leaving the classroom. Understanding his history of negative school experiences, staff worked at his pace to establish trust and safety. Rapport was built through high interest activities and routines were co-developed with Archie.

Initially Archie spent time in the reception area. Then a table was set up outside of his classroom and Archie sat there to do fun activities with the staff. The classroom door was always left open and during some lessons, Archie started watching and eventually went into the classroom. He now participates in all lessons, except writing, because of a fear of failure. Staff are working to adapt writing tasks and build skills and confidence with writing. His mum reports being "blown away" by his progress. For the first time ever, Archie is happy to come to school. He is reading, after refusing to do so in the past.

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<sup>7</sup> McVilly K, Ainsworth S, Graham L, Harrison M, Sojo V, Spivakovsky C, Gale L, Genat A, Zirnsak T. (2022). *Outcomes associated with 'inclusive', 'segregated' and 'integrated' settings: Accommodation and community living, employment and education*. A research report commissioned by the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. University of Melbourne, Australia.

<sup>8</sup> NSW Department of Education, Literacy and Numeracy Precursor Indicators Assessment for Complex Learners Project, 2022

<sup>9</sup> Haas K, Carter M, Stephenson J, & Gibbs V (2022). [Benefits and Challenges of a Hybrid Distance Education Program for Autistic School-Age Students: Parent, Student and Teacher Perspectives](#). *Australasian Journal of Special and Inclusive Education*, 46(1), 61-73.

Kyah's\* transition from his local school to an Aspect satellite class in year five was described as 'rocky'. Initially experiencing emotional dysregulation, he often escalated, or would shut down and was unable to verbally communicate.

Aspect staff introduced visual communication supports. They designed and implemented a highly structured and supportive program that reflected Kyah's strengths and interests. An individualised and tailored teaching and learning program was developed, grounded in high expectations of what Kyah could achieve. He was supported to develop advocacy skills and understand his Autistic identity. Kyah was actively involved in shaping the goals in his Individual Plan and would prepare for meetings by developing a list of things he wanted in his school program.

Staff report it took two years for Kyah to really settle into his Aspect school program and thrive. Kyah became a student leader in his year group, and a strong advocate for both himself and his peers. His positive sense of identity grew and he had enormous respect for the staff. Kyah graduated from his Aspect high school program and transitioned to TAFE to study media. He also volunteered at an animal refuge.

### **Families see the benefits and value choice**

Aspect connected families and community have told us clearly and repeatedly that they want and need a continuum of schooling options, including autism-specific schools and settings.

Our data reflects that parents highly value specialised options that meet the unique needs of their children with specially trained staff in dedicated spaces.<sup>10</sup> High demand and extended waitlists for our schools confirm this.

Just as families can choose between education options such as religious, performing arts, sports, selective and STEM schools, or Montessori and Steiner options, it is equally critical that they can also choose specialised autism settings where they believe this is the best match for their child and family.

We believe this is consistent with international human rights (Article 24 of the CRPD) for all people to access educational opportunities that suit their needs, values and abilities, whilst ensuring the right to continue their education without discrimination and on an equal basis with others.

### **Calls to phase out specialist settings are risky and detrimental**

Every state and territory government in Australia operates specialist schools and classes that primarily or exclusively enrol students with disability. There are also specialist settings in the Catholic and independent schools' sectors in almost every jurisdiction.

*I absolutely support improving disability inclusion in mainstream education, but that doesn't require the closure of quality specialist schools. We need more, not less options and control over supports offered to our kids. Parents of typical children get legitimate choice when it comes to education. I want that for all of us*

*As a parent, knowing that my child is supported and he's somewhere where he is understood and the teachers are working together as a team to bring out the best in my child ... it's been amazing.*

*I am delighted with the individualised academic support he has received ... [and] for the targeted and explicit teaching that is strengthening his capabilities for adjusting to life as an adult in society today....*

*Our mental health has improved ... just the knowledge that he's safe and looked after and learning and doing all the things and progressing the way he should be ... has helped us immensely, so we can concentrate on the family, and our work.*

Parent voices, Aspect

<sup>10</sup> Aspect, 'Perspectives: Your School in Focus' survey

Recommendations made by some Commissioners of the DRC to phase out specialist settings and approaches are concerning and fraught with risk. They do not reflect the experience and evidence base of what works, nor will they advance the rights of all Autistic children to inclusive education.

Indeed, experiences of specialist settings including autism-specific schools and classrooms being shut down elsewhere (UK and Canada) have led to decreased school engagement amongst some students on the autism spectrum and increased home schooling. Those with higher and more complex needs are most at risk of being shut out.

Some of our community are understandably upset and anxious about risks to the continuation of specialist settings, and the stigma and polarisation generated by some of the related commentary.

*To close schools like Aspect would remove a vital and rare safe space for kids like my son to learn.*

Parent voice, Aspect

This Inquiry can play a key role in arresting this concern by articulating a cross-party position that affirms commitment to a continuum of high quality and accountable settings to deliver inclusive education for *all* students.

### Cautionary lessons from England

A program of reducing the number of specialist schools in England is proving detrimental for Autistic students.<sup>11</sup>

- [Exclusions of students have risen by 27.8%](#) compared to pre pandemic rates. [Autistic students comprise over half of these exclusions.](#)
- Excluded students are on waiting lists for specialist provision in over a third of council regions
- There has been substantial growth in the number Autistic students being home-educated (between 2% to 8% per annum since 2016).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Department for Education, *Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England*, Autumn term 2022/23, UK Government 2023. Timpson E, *Review of School Exclusion*, 2019. Gray L, Hill V., & Pellicano, E. (2023). "He's shouting so loud but nobody's hearing him": A multi-informant study of autistic pupils' experiences of school non-attendance and exclusion. *Autism & Developmental Language Impairments*, v 8. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23969415231207816>

<sup>12</sup> O'Hagan S, Bond C and Hebron J (2021) [What do we know about home education and autism? A thematic synthesis review. Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders](#), 80. 101711. p. 101711. ISSN 1750-9467. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2020.101711>

## Addressing barriers to inclusive education in mainstream schools is the highest priority

Recommendations to rapidly build the capacity and capability of mainstream schools to improve inclusion

2. Provide specialist coaching and support to build the capability of schools and teachers to deliver differentiated teaching practices and make curriculum and assessment adaptations.
3. Invest in building system-wide capability in positive behaviour support. This will help to reduce the use of disciplinary exclusions and restrictive practices.
4. Develop clear and practical guidance for NSW schools on implementing reasonable adjustments. This should incorporate guidance on autism-specific adjustments.

### Most Autistic students are attending mainstream schools

The proportion of students identified as having disability is increasing – with the most significant growth being Autistic students.<sup>13</sup> In 2022, over one in five students enrolled in Australian schools were receiving an educational adjustment due to disability.

With between 85-90% of students with disability attending mainstream schools,<sup>14</sup> lifting mainstream capacity and capability in disability inclusion – particularly for Autistic students – must be the first order priority for reform.

Aspect endorses recommendations of the DRC that all students with disability should be welcome to enrol in their local school and have the opportunity and environment that enables them to learn to the maximum extent feasible.

### Mainstream schools face challenges and barriers to delivering inclusive education

While there are some stand out examples of inclusion in mainstream settings, our observation is that the system-wide capacity and capability of mainstream schools to respond to the diverse needs of Autistic students is significantly lacking.

High rates of student disengagement, the disproportionate uptake of home schooling, overuse of disciplinary absences and poor retention and attainment for Autistic students is a strong theme from families, national data<sup>15</sup> and inquiries.

Many of the challenges faced by Autistic students that were presented to the Legislative Council during their 2017 Inquiry into education of students with disability or special needs remain relevant today.

We acknowledge that NSW has continued to evolve and advance its inclusive education paradigm. Strategic directions in the [Department of Education's Disability Strategy](#) 2019 were developed as part of

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<sup>13</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (SDAC) found that 7.7% of children under 15 were reported as having disability in 2018, up from 6.9% in 2012. It reported a 25.1% increase in autism spectrum disorder prevalence from 2015 to 2018, with the highest prevalence rates among children and young people.

<sup>14</sup> Expert Panel's Review, a [Better and Fairer](#) Education System

<sup>15</sup> See: Senate Select Committee on Autism, Services, support and life outcomes for Autistic Australians [Final Report](#), 2022. ABS, [Autism in Australia Report](#) 2018. There is a lack of published NSW education data by disability type.

the response to the 2017 Report of the Legislative Council. The more recent [Inclusive Education Statement for students with disability](#) builds upon this.

In practice, the current approach is predominately based on students adapting to the mainstream offer, with some minor 'reasonable adjustments' – at best. Barriers to inclusive education have been well-documented in many reports, most recently that of the DRC report. Some of the key continuing issues experienced by Autistic students in NSW include:

- **gatekeeping practices**, which deny students access to their local school or informally discourage their attendance.
- **inappropriate use of exclusionary discipline** (much of this is informal, so not recorded), including sending students home or restricting their hours of attendance, often from their first year at school.
- **teachers with little understanding of autism:** reflecting poor coverage of disability inclusion considerations in teacher training. The DRC cited a survey from Children and Young People with Disability Australia reporting that just 35% of respondents felt that teachers and support staff had adequate training and knowledge to support their student.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, a survey of teachers revealed that just 38% felt prepared to teach students with special needs at the end of their formal training.<sup>18</sup>
- **lack of appropriate adjustments, supports and individualised planning** reflecting both a lack of workforce capacity (low levels of teacher knowledge about autism adjustments) and limited school capacity and resourcing for tailored approaches (large class sizes, high student staff ratios).
- **restricted opportunity to participate in activities:** such as excursions, assemblies, camps and extra-curricular activities
- **built environments** that exacerbate sensory sensitivities.
- **poor integration** between the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and education supports.
- **little scaffolding to support social relationships** and navigate unspoken social rules, resulting in isolation and marginalisation. Bullying is a live issue that disproportionately impacts Autistic students.

*Speaking to schools and getting feedback that they're not the right fit for my son, it's just so hard to hear.*

*His transition to high school didn't go well and by the end of term one, he was refusing to go back. I think it was a very chaotic environment with big classes. He didn't have a sense that the teachers knew where he was at in his learning.*

*My oldest was in mainstream from preschool to year six ... He was suspended every week, sometimes multiple times a week.*

*My son was being bullied and tormented so cruelly in mainstream...*

Parent voices, Aspect

*Our students had a history of absconding and one had a history of self-harm in prior mainstream school settings. Parents reported that standard mainstream classes were a challenge for both the teachers and the student: "it was just way too traumatic for everybody involved and you're in a class of 30."*

*Parents reported that they were constantly concerned about their child's safety and wellbeing at school and were regularly contacted to pick up their child from school – which disrupted other elements in the family home such as care for the other children or their career.*

Aspect research<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Aspect Research Centre for Autism Practice, *Evaluation of the Aspect Southeast Sydney school pilot class*, 2022. Unpublished. Available by request.

<sup>17</sup> DRC [Final report Volume 7 Part A](#)

<sup>18</sup> [Teaching and Learning International Survey \(TALIS\)](#) (2018)



- **negative community attitudes** and discrimination against Autistic students and perceptions of the impact they have on other students.

### **Long term transformational change is needed; but early actions could have rapid impact**

We appreciate that reform directions set by recent landmark inquiries and reviews are seeking to deliver real change, and that the NSW Government will be working through options and approaches with their counterparts from across Australia.

Nothing short of genuine and dramatic systemic transformation – across policy; funding; accountability; workforce training; practice/pedagogy; and community attitudes – will markedly shift the dial on the status quo.

Some early actions to drive systemic improvements across mainstream schools that we recommend NSW fast-track are outlined below. As Australia’s lead expert in autism-specific education, Aspect stands ready to partner with the Education Department and NSW schools to inform and support rapid progress.

### **Schools and teachers need practical help to implement differentiated teaching practices and make adaptations to curriculum and assessment methods for diverse learners**

There is a strong evidence base to inform inclusive teaching practices. NSW’s [Inclusive Education Practice Hub](#) web portal contains a rich body of inclusive evidence-based practice resources, including materials well suited for Autistic students.

The opportunity – and challenge – is to assist a stretched workforce to utilise and operationalise these into daily practice. This takes more than access to web-based resources or a one-off professional development session.

The DRC identified effective methods for equipping teachers to deliver differentiated approaches including:<sup>19</sup>

- a multi-tiered system of instruction that helps teachers adapt learning experiences for students based on their individual strengths, needs and challenges and provides additional support for students at risk of falling behind
- the use of specialist coaches to support generalist teachers in lesson planning, and to observe and aid students as necessary
- small group scripted remedial learning programs delivered by teaching assistants
- co-teaching models that pair generalist and specialist teachers together to share the responsibilities of lesson planning and instructing and assessing students.

It is notable that some other States (Queensland, Victoria and recently SA) have introduced autism-specialists or coaches to build the capacity of mainstream schools, education leaders and teachers.

NSW is yet to invest in a comparable system-wide approach. However, Aspect, via partnership arrangements with individual schools, is actively building whole-school capability to engage and enable Autistic students. This includes working with staff teams to design and implement effective strategies; coaching and consultancy regarding curriculum, assessment and teaching adaptations – including for students with

*Our partnership with Aspect provides so many benefits.*

*Having onsite autism expertise benefits all present at the school. Teachers are linked to the latest research and practices. Classrooms have structures, routines and resources specific to Autistic students...*

*... Parents have confidence in what we are doing.*

Danny Rankin, Principal  
St Joseph’s Primary School, South Grafton

<sup>19</sup> DRC [Final report Volume 7 Part A](#)

complex communication or support needs; and providing opportunities for staff to observe model approaches to autism-specific education support. Aspect receives strong affirmation from partner schools about the value of this approach to strengthening whole school capacity and capability and improving pedagogy.

There is immediate opportunity to expand this type of approach to rapidly uplift capability across mainstream schools.

### **Co-teaching for integration**

Teachers from Aspect's satellite classes offer co-teaching opportunities with mainstream teacher-colleagues to support the integration of Autistic students into mainstream classes. Prior to integration, there is a focus on building skills of Aspect students to navigate the mainstream context, class routines and lesson approaches, backed by individualised strategies for preparing students for their new classroom experiences.

In the mainstream class, the Aspect teacher is initially focussed on supporting their transitioning students individually. Following that, they step into a co-teaching role that supports the whole class and models quality classroom practice for diversity and inclusion and robust autism strategies for the 'receiving' teacher and the rest of the class.

### **Building know-how in positive behaviour support is a must**

Children and young people on the autism spectrum often find mainstream school to be a complex and demanding social environment,<sup>20</sup> which can have behavioural ramifications. Autistic students are routinely and disproportionately excluded (both formally and informally) from mainstream schools for disciplinary reasons. We regularly hear reports of children (even in their earliest years of school) being sent home or told to attend for just a few hours each day. Real change in these uncomfortable metrics hinges, in large part, on building system-wide capacity in positive behaviour support.

While there has been much interest in introducing school-wide positive behaviour support across the education sector in recent years, there has been a lack of tools and approaches for Autistic students.

Aspect welcomes the DRC's recommendations aimed at preventing the inappropriate use of exclusionary disciplinary practices and closely monitoring these practices across all school sectors ([Recommendation 7.2](#)). It has also made related recommendations about support for students with challenging behaviours and reducing the use of restrictive and seclusion practices.

### **Improving autism-specific positive behaviour support**

Aspect Research and Education teams, together with Autistic people, have adapted school-wide PBS tools for Autistic students (the Aspect Autism-Specific-Tiered Fidelity Inventory). This tool seeks to support assessment and drive continuous improvement of our practices to ensure a strategic approach to improving positive behaviour support.

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<sup>20</sup> Horgan, F., Kenny, N., & Flynn, P. (2023). A systematic review of the experiences of autistic young people enrolled in mainstream second-level (post-primary) schools. *Autism : the international journal of research and practice*, 27(2), 526–538. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613221105089>

Aspect has undertaken significant research and development work in positive behaviour strategies for Autistic students that could be used to inform improvements in mainstream settings.<sup>21</sup>

We embed positive behaviour support (PBS) specialists in our education team. They work within a tiered fidelity model (see box above) that provides proactive autism-specific strategies for our team.

Developing proficiency in PBS helps schools to limit the use of disciplinary absences and restrictive or seclusive practices. In addition to delivering benefits for students and their classmates, our experience shows that capability in positive behaviour management also has positive impacts on staff wellbeing and retention.

When Rex\* transitioned from a mainstream school to Aspect he was avoiding school, had lots of anger issues and self-identified as being a 'naughty' child. Rex's school refusal saw him attend a maximum of two hours on any given day in his mainstream school. The Aspect team provided a structured, interest and strengths-based program. A big focus for Rex was building skills in sensory and emotional regulation and building self-esteem. Rex also had an Attendance Improvement Plan that was regularly monitored and reviewed. Over time, his attendance has increased to 80%. He enjoys supporting new students, has taken up opportunities to provide support for students needing co-regulation and is highly empathetic when others experience distress.

Vincent\* came to Aspect with a history of significant trauma. At his previous mainstream school, he had spent much of his time out of the classroom engaging in behaviours of concern. Peers were afraid of him.

The Aspect team focussed on building trust, providing Vincent with choice and control – including having a voice in his lesson design and supports provided. The school implemented a complex situation review process and engaged with key stakeholders in his life, so that wrap-around support occurred for the student in different life contexts.

This approach enabled the school to become a safe and happy place for Vincent. He has since developed friends and become empathetic with the younger students. The school has continued to build Vincent's self-advocacy skills, teach leadership skills and provide opportunities for these to be practised in his school day.

### **Clear guidance on reasonable adjustments, including autism adjustments – will help**

The DRC found there is a lack of awareness, understanding and adherence to the Disability Standards for Education, particularly with respect to how education providers interpret and operationalise obligations to provide reasonable adjustments.

The DRC called for states and territories to improve policies and procedures on the provision of reasonable adjustments to students with disability (Recommendation 7.3).

Aspect urges the NSW Government to move rapidly on this recommendation and create guidance to support NSW schools to better meet their reasonable adjustment obligations. At a minimum, this should cover:

- processes for identifying, planning, implementing, recording and evaluating the effectiveness of adjustments

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<sup>21</sup> Johnsson G, Bulkeley K, & Crowe B. (2020). *Positive behaviour support via telepractice: Reaching out to rural communities*. Intellectual Disability Australasia, 41(2), 12-15. Aspect also contributed to the development of the NDIS PBS Capability Framework : <https://www.ndiscommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-07/telepbs-practitioner-guide-aligning-quality-practice.pdf>

- processes for involving students and their families/carers in decision-making regarding adjustments
- examples of reasonable adjustments, including for different disability types
- development of individual learning and support plans
- sources of funding for providing supports to students with disability and the procedures governing the allocation of funds
- interfaces with workforce wellbeing and OHS requirements.

The [Senate Inquiry into Autism \(reported 2022\)](#) called for the development of autism-specific guidance on reasonable adjustments<sup>22</sup> given the distinct challenges and enablers facing Autistic students. Given the high numbers of Autistic students, there would be significant benefit in incorporating specific guidance on common autism-adjustments. Aspect has deep expertise in this and stands ready to assist.

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<sup>22</sup> Parliament of Australia, Select Committee on Autism, Services, Support and Life Outcomes for Autistic Australians: [Chapter 12 Education](#)

## New supports need careful design and implementation

### Recommendations: effective new supports and support approaches

5. Establish an advisory group of key stakeholders to inform the design and implementation of Foundation Supports (Early Intervention) in NSW. Changes to NDIS eligibility will mean many children with developmental delay and disability (including some on the autism spectrum) will be reliant on this new program of support.
6. Incorporate autism-specific expertise into future school hubs that are anticipated to bring education, disability and community supports together.

### Effective Foundation Supports (Early Intervention) will be critically important for Autistic children

The Australian Government has recently announced that work is commencing to develop a [National Strategy on Foundation Supports](#).

We anticipate that many children with developmental delay and some children on the autism spectrum, will no longer be eligible for NDIS. Instead, they will be diverted to Early Intervention provided via this new tier of Foundation Supports. Schools and early learning centres will be key delivery locations for these supports.

For our community, the stakes in this reform being well designed and implemented are very high. Accordingly, we urge this Inquiry to recommend that the NSW Government rapidly establish an advisory group, that includes autism expertise, to help shape the State's contribution to this national strategy, and the NSW based design and application of Foundation Supports.

Aspect, along with colleague autism-specific organisations across Australia,<sup>23</sup> have identified core elements of best practice Early Intervention for Autistic children (see box below).

#### Best practice elements for Early Intervention for Autistic children

- ✓ Strong focus on strengthening family capability and resilience.
- ✓ Neuro-affirming and strengths-based approaches.
- ✓ Child centred, developmentally appropriate practice that honours childhood and play, delivered in natural environments.
- ✓ Practitioners with autism expertise and with the knowledge and experience to deliver evidence-based supports that are positive, and not harmful or distressing.
- ✓ A key worker model and transdisciplinary approach.
- ✓ Holistic and integrated supports, between practitioners and systems, including support for strong engagement in early learning.
- ✓ Peer and carer mediated approaches.

<sup>23</sup> Autism Advisory Board of Australia, *From Problems to Solutions: Submission to NDIS Review*, 2023. Available by request.

- ✓ Flexibility to adjust levels of support as needed. Sometimes it is beneficial to do intensive bursts, other times it's appropriate to dial back to basic maintenance levels and monitor natural developmental progression.
- ✓ Real and measurable progress and outcomes that support inclusion and enhance quality of life.

**Schools as hubs for disability and community supports are a positive development. Autism-specific expertise should be incorporated.**

The anticipated move towards on-site allied health and community services in mainstream schools is welcome. It should help to strengthen the capability of schools and educators to provide inclusive experiences.

Aspect has significant experience in this embedded allied health approach, which could help inform future design. Key approaches include:

- using transdisciplinary approaches that build cross-team capability.
- regular Learning Support Teams (made up of allied health/educators) meetings to plan, action, monitor and report shared strategies.
- delivery of therapy in the early learning and school environment, with the therapist observing and advising on environmental, communication, emotional regulation and sensory supports, scaffolding participation in activities and play with peers and upskilling teachers and teacher aids to replicate these supports day to day.
- integrating therapy goals into a child's education environment and curriculum

Given the large numbers of Autistic children in the NSW school system, incorporating autism-specific expertise into these hubs is recommended. Practitioners with this expertise bring an additional layer of training, ongoing professional development, and supervised experience to be skilled at working with Autistic students and their families.

## **A high quality, accountable and connected specialist sector is also important**

**Recommendations: Specialist settings with strong connections to mainstream schools and life**

- 7. Set expectations, in NSW policy and programs, for specialist settings to be connected to mainstream education, employment and community life.**
- 8. Establish a fund (as recommended by the Better and Fairer Education System Review) to support innovations that test different modes of delivery, staffing, and governance frameworks, including networks of schools between settings and sectors.**
- 9. Make provision for the incorporation of specialist settings - including autism specific settings - in the development of education precincts and major new school developments.**
- 10. Promote and incentivise innovative partnerships between specialist settings and mainstream schools to build capability and connections.**
- 11. Adjust funding mechanisms to enable concurrent enrolment in schools across different systems, including between specialist independent and mainstream schools.**

Aspect has asked this Inquiry to articulate a clear and unanimous position that specialist settings have a critical place in an inclusive education system.

Aspect's settings are purposely designed to prepare students for inclusion in mainstream education, employment and community environments. We want to see this approach reflected across *all* specialist disability settings – including the [expansion of support classes for students with disability](#) - announced by the NSW Government. We collectively must ensure a high-quality education offer and safeguard against risks of segregation or isolation of students in any specialist setting.

### **Policy and programmatic levers could strengthen connections with mainstream settings**

We urge the Inquiry and the NSW Government to create the expectation, policies and programmatic environment to ensure specialist settings are closely connected to mainstream education and community life.

To this end, Aspect endorses recommendations (set out below) of the DRC Commissioners that were supportive of specialist settings continuing. Some of the below points were picked up in Recommendation 7.4 as part of the unanimous recommendations by all Commissioners.

#### **Recommendation 7.15 Disability Royal Commission**

State and territory educational authorities should implement the following measures:

- wherever practicable locate new non-mainstream schools and relocate existing non-mainstream schools within or in close proximity to mainstream schools Where co-location not possible, schools should still establish programs that enable students with disability to interact with their peers in nearby mainstream schools
- create partnerships between mainstream and non-mainstream schools as a means of encouraging and arranging regular interchange between groups of students enrolled in the schools

- facilitate to the maximum extent feasible participation by individual students and groups of students enrolled in non-mainstream schools in educational, cultural, sporting, recreational and celebratory activities with their peers in partnership with mainstream schools and other educational institutions
- arrange for students in non-mainstream schools, where practicable, to participate in classes and educational activities with their peers in mainstream schools
- establish programs for students enrolled in mainstream schools to participate in activities with their peers in non-mainstream schools
- provide, where appropriate, for concurrent enrolment for individual students in both mainstream and non-mainstream schools
- assist non-mainstream schools to facilitate where appropriate, the transition of students with disability, particularly those with complex support needs, to mainstream schools, whether on a full-time or part-time basis
- provide assistance to mainstream and non-mainstream schools in understanding the strengths and skills of students with disability for post-school transition, including assistance in planning and preparing for further study and training
- ensure non-mainstream schools encourage and support students with disability completing their education to seek and obtain employment in the open labour market, rather than in Australian Disability Enterprises or similar environments.

The National Disability Commission (see Recommendation 5.5) should conduct or arrange for a comprehensive review of progress towards providing inclusive education for children and young people with complex support needs.

We also point to the Better and Fairer Education System Review recommendations (Recommendation 7E) to create innovation funding to support innovations that test different modes of delivery, staffing, and governance frameworks, including networks of schools between different settings and sectors.

There is huge potential for NSW to invest in trialling and evaluating a range of innovations with partners across settings and sectors.

### **Make provision for specialist settings in education precincts and major school developments**

Aspect recommends that NSW makes provision for specialist settings - including autism specific settings - to be included in existing and future education precincts and in major new school developments.

All of Aspects satellite classrooms are located on or near mainstream schools – but this is by individual negotiation rather than because of government policy settings.

For our main school sites, Aspect is actively preferencing co-location opportunities. Examples of our co-locations include:

- Aspect Hills Shire school: in the Gables Education Precinct
- Aspect South Coast satellite campus: co-located with the early learning hub at Wollongong University
- Aspect Riverina Wagga campus: a collaboration with Charles Sturt University.

We have found co-locations generate natural opportunities for community integration; shared access to resources; cross-setting learning and exchange; easier transitions to mainstream schools/post-secondary institutions; broader access to vocational exploration and work placements; and serve to build student aspirations around future opportunities.

However, there are significant practical barriers to systemically achieving this due to the absence of enabling policy settings, lack of suitable space and premium land and lease costs.



### Promote partnerships between specialist and mainstream schools

Aspect's Partnering for Purpose document<sup>24</sup> outlines our vision, approach and framework for partnering with mainstream schools.

We have active partnerships with around 60 schools (Catholic and state) who host our autism-specific 'satellite' classrooms on their grounds. With our partner schools, we aim to create a seamless environment where students can move between settings for an inclusive school experience.

Aspect is pleased to have seven regional agreements with the NSW Catholic Education Dioceses and MoUs with a range of individual Independent, Catholic and state schools. These partnership arrangements seek to deliver mutual value between settings and cover:

- building the schools capacity to teach students with diverse learning needs
- providing regular and ongoing professional learning for the host school
- establishing a model class that can be visited by the host school staff to gather insights and strategies to assist in their own classrooms
- collaborating on integration activities; transition plans and joint programs or projects
- consultancy services to support host schools with plans for individual students, classroom support, support strategies and environmental recommendations
- participating in regular host school staff briefings
- sharing advice and strategies from Aspect's allied health therapists
- joint governance and oversight of the partnership by senior leaders.

This partnership approach goes well beyond merely housing a classroom on a mainstream school campus and could provide a template for the upcoming expansion of support classes announced by the NSW Government.

#### An effective partnership approach

Sydney Catholic Schools (Sydney Diocese) is one of Aspect's biggest partners, with 12 schools hosting autism-specific satellite centres that approximately 180 students attend. Through this partnership, Aspect and host school staff collaborate to share expertise and build inclusive practice and environments for both individual students and the broader school community.

### Remove barriers to concurrent school enrolments

Aspect's education programs are designed to provide a supportive bridge between more intensive support and mainstream education. Our model enables students to gain the skills and capabilities they need to transition into a satellite or mainstream school when they are ready. We do not intend to hold students for their full journey through school.

The DRC recommends concurrent school enrolment, something that Aspect believes would positively help in advancing inclusion. Current NSW protocols do not enable concurrent enrolment across schools in different sectors, significantly limiting opportunities for shared autism-specific and mainstream enrolments.

We are aware of arrangements elsewhere that permit this. Queensland enables dual enrolment in both an independent school and a state school where such arrangements are assessed as being in the best educational interests of the child. The policy and funding environment provides for [approved flexible](#)

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<sup>24</sup> Aspect Education, Partnering for Purpose, 2023. Unpublished. Available by request.

[arrangements](#) that enable students with disability to be concurrently enrolled in both an independent specialist school (such as the Autism Qld school) and a state school.

### **Promote integration of students from different schools and settings**

Integration activities form a core part of Aspect's education offer. Most of our students have integration goals in their individual plans.

Aspect's satellite program is designed to concurrently offer autism-specific education and the opportunity to participate in activities with mainstream peers. Students in satellite classes are supported to engage in a range of host school activities such as school assemblies, sports, excursions, SRC and student clubs. They regularly attend mainstream classes and are encouraged to use shared play spaces. Many students in our satellite classes are working towards full transition to a mainstream school.

Opportunities for reverse integration (for involvement of students from mainstream schools) are also encouraged. Our partnering arrangements with host schools provide options for mainstream student participation in Aspect-run programs and activities. Some examples of reverse integration include attendance at Aspect run camps and siblings' days.

Integration opportunities are also offered at Aspect main school sites. Furthermore, students in Aspect's main school sites often transition to satellite settings to have enhanced opportunities for integration into mainstream activities.

*Not all non-mainstream schools perpetuate segregation. Ours is aimed at equipping students with skills to transition into a mainstream or lower support setting as soon as possible. My son's class frequently visits the neighbouring public school for social and educational events.*

Parent, Aspect student

The DRC found that there is limited evidence on the most effective programs to foster positive social relationships between students with disability and students without disability. They recommended that states and territories should continue to trial programs and initiatives and to monitor and evaluate their outcomes – something that Aspect would be keen to partner in.

Aspect student Zelda\* was elected as a school captain, alongside her mainstream peers, at a large mainstream school that hosts an Aspect satellite class. She went through the nomination process, delivered a campaign speech, was voted in by her peers and endorsed by the school executive. Zelda had equal status and the same expectations and opportunities as the other school captains.

### **Mainstream employment and further education must be a focus of specialist settings**

Aspect is pleased the DRC and NDIS Review have made recommendations aimed at improving career guidance, vocational exploration and transition support for students with disability, including overhauling the NDIS funded School Leaver Employment Support (SLES). We support calls for abandoning the use of Australian Disability Enterprises (ADE) for work experience.

Aspect schools maintain a significant focus on preparation for work, with vocational programs running from Year 9. Industry tasters are conducted with our wide range of corporate partners connected with our [Aspect Autism Friendly](#) initiative (none are ADEs). These often result in work experience placements, casual employment or regular volunteering opportunities while at school. Some schools have social enterprise (such as a coffee van and a community lawn mowing service) for young people to train and develop work skills.

Aspect recently conducted a work education pilot (supported by philanthropic funding) that generated very positive results.<sup>25</sup> Involving students in Yr 9 – 12 at two of our main school campuses, students undertook work skills training; participated in work placements in open employment; and completed certifications in areas such as first aid, White Card, and financial literacy. Results showed significant improvement in work readiness and self-determination skills. Several participants have secured ongoing paid roles or volunteer positions following the program.

## **Aspect stand ready to assist this Inquiry**

Aspect would welcome the chance to give evidence before the Inquiry.

We would also be happy to host a site visit for Committee members and staff to get direct insights into autism-specific settings, meet students and their families, and our mainstream school partners.

**Contact:** Maryanne Gosling, National Director Aspect Education

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<sup>25</sup> Aspect Research Centre for Autism Practice, *An evaluation of Aspect's funded work education programs*, 2023. Unpublished. Available by request.