

Submission  
No 49

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

**Organisation:** Autism Awareness Australia

**Date Received:** 29 February 2024

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Parliament of NSW  
Legislative Council  
Portfolio Committee No 3 - Education  
Sydney NSW 2000

**Attention: Committee Members - Inquiry into children and young people with disability in New South Wales educational settings**

Autism Awareness Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this important Inquiry. Our submission draws on extensive experience advocating for individuals with autism, including children and young people within educational settings in New South Wales (NSW).

This submission addresses the terms of reference by highlighting the current challenges, barriers, and opportunities for enhancing the educational experiences of students with disabilities. We aim to provide evidence-based recommendations to support a more inclusive, safe, and effective educational environment for all students, with a particular focus on those with autism.

**ABOUT US**

Founded in 2007, [Autism Awareness Australia](http://www.autismawareness.com.au) (AAA) is a not-for-profit autism education and awareness organisation. Our goal is simple: To improve the lives of all Australians on the autism spectrum and the families who love them.

As the country's leading voice for autism families, Autism Awareness Australia aims to spark positive change by increasing education and understanding of autism in Australia.

Autism Awareness's campaigns and events have reached millions of Australians. We have delivered most of the programs free of charge across the country, including in rural and regional communities.

For 17 years, Autism Awareness Australia (AAA) has been recognised as a trusted organisation, offering invaluable information and resources to individuals with autism and their families. We've established ourselves as Australia's leading authority on autism and related conditions. Our independence and an unwavering commitment to quality have cemented our respected reputation in the community. Today, we proudly oversee the largest autism network and database in the country, with a vibrant community of over 175,000 active followers.



Autism Awareness Australia has long been led by parents of children with autism. Our Executive Director has a child with autism, as does 65% of our Board. Many contributors and volunteers over the years have either had autism or were the parents of children with autism.

### **Executive Summary:**

Early in 2024, Autism Awareness Australia launched a National Education and Autism Parent Survey to better understand some of the issues facing autism families when enrolling their children in Australian schools. Data from this survey will be released in full in April 2024 but some early data has informed the information in this submission. Just on 30% of the respondents to the survey were from NSW. Parents reported that 43% of children refuse to go to school on a weekly basis and another 27% experience school refusal more than once a term. This certainly indicates that many schools are challenging environments for young people with autism and steps must be taken to address these barriers.

There is also the aspect of if school leaders are truly welcoming and committed to inclusive education. 35% of parents reported that they had experience of a school refusing to or discouraging the enrollment of their child. Of that cohort, 50% reported that happening in their local public schools.

With the recent proposed changes in the NDIS Review, the Federal Government has stated that it will be requiring State Governments to contribute more to the support of individuals with disabilities. We believe the biggest impact to this change will be on State education systems who are at this point in time, not prepared to be the main support mechanism for young people with autism. Whilst there have long been issues as to how well (and patchy) NSW's Education system manages children with autism, the upcoming changes to the NDIS may exacerbate that need for systemic improvement and a genuine commitment to inclusive education.

### **Addressing the Terms of Reference:**

(a) Experiences within Educational Settings: Many students with autism face significant challenges in traditional educational settings due to sensory sensitivities, social communication difficulties, and the need for routine and structure. Tailored support, including the use of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and autism-specific training for staff, can significantly improve educational outcomes and experiences.



(b) Barriers to Inclusive Education: Key barriers include a lack of understanding and awareness of autism, insufficient training for educators, and limited resources and support services. Stigma and the social exclusion of students with disabilities compound these challenges.

(c) Needs in Regional, Rural, and Remote Areas: Access to specialised services and resources is markedly limited in these areas, exacerbating educational and social outcomes for students with disabilities. Enhanced funding and training support for staff in remote educational settings are critical.

(d) Impact of Inadequate Support: The lack of adequate support not only hampers the educational progress of students with disabilities but also affects their mental health, self-esteem, and overall well-being. Families often experience significant stress and financial burden due to seeking additional support outside the school system.

(e) Benefits of Adequate Support: Providing adequate support for students with disabilities leads to a more inclusive environment that benefits all students by fostering understanding, empathy, and diversity. It also improves learning outcomes for students with disabilities, enhancing their engagement and participation.

(f) Social, Economic, and Personal Benefits: Investing in the education of students with disabilities has long-term benefits, including increased employment opportunities, reduced dependency on social services, and enhanced societal contributions and helps to build a genuinely inclusive Australia.

(g) Experiences of Educators: Educators often lack the necessary resources, training, and support to effectively teach students with disabilities. Professional development and ongoing support are essential to empower educators. The education system is fundamentally flawed by design in using minimally trained 'teachers aides' (SLSOs) supporting teachers (who will have varied training themselves in autism and positive behaviour support). In our recent parent survey 64% of parents had experienced a non supportive principal or school teacher which 66% reported staff having a lack of experience.

(h) Resourcing and Infrastructure: Schools require adequate funding for specialised staffing, teaching aids, and infrastructure modifications to support the needs of students with disabilities. For students with autism, those accommodations may be less obvious from an 'infrastructure' point of view but are still critical.



(i) Safe and Inclusive Learning Environments: Policies and practices must prioritize the safety and inclusion of all students, teachers, and support staff. This includes addressing bullying and ensuring accessible facilities.

(j)-(k) Policies on Suspensions, Expulsions, and Restrictive Practices: These practices often disproportionately affect students with disabilities and can exacerbate behavioural issues. Alternatives that focus on positive behaviour support and conflict resolution are needed. In our recent parent survey 67% of parents reported their child had experience bullying, and 36% had experienced involuntary separation from their peers by the school.

No plan to stop the ongoing expulsion and suspension of children with autism in schools. This includes parents being called into schools to collect their children during the school day as there is no internal capability (or will) to manage the child in the school setting and implement strategies to meet their needs.

(l) Early Intervention Programs: Early identification and early intervention are crucial for improving educational outcomes. Access to quality early intervention services is essential prior to the child starting school.

(m) Regulatory and Oversight Mechanisms: Current mechanisms may be insufficient in protecting the rights of children with disabilities. Strengthened oversight and regulatory frameworks are necessary. At this point in time, I think the 'Local Schools, local decisions' culture within education has led to poor outcomes for students with autism.

(p) Implementing Disability Royal Commission Recommendations: It is imperative that NSW takes a leading role in implementing these recommendations to ensure an inclusive education system. It is worthy of note though, that in our recent parent survey 89.5% of respondent supported the idea that parents should be able to choose the most appropriate schooling option (e.g., mainstream, special education) for their child. Only 11% of parents preferred the option that all children should receive schooling in mainstream settings. Special education and more restricted schooling options are often chosen by families due to safety. They would like their child in a more inclusive educational environment but are often not catered for.



### **Other issues:**

- We currently do not have national guidelines for the education of children with neurodevelopmental conditions. There is no uniform agreement on the most appropriate and best-practice methodologies for children with autism (and other disabilities) in our education system. We have different rules and arrangements in different states, often with inordinate autonomy going to individual schools and principals. The 'local school / local decisions' policies have had a detrimental effect for families of children with autism wanting to enrol their child in school.
- Regular 'gate-keeping' by schools not wanting to enrol students with autism, especially those with additional learning needs and challenging behaviour.
- No national commitment to inclusive education, nor a roadmap on how we may re-design the future of education in this country to ensure it includes ALL Australian children.
- Lack of before and after-school care for children with autism unfairly affects families with working parents and limits employment options (often for women)
- NDIS funding for children with autism can not be allocated to supports they may need during school hours as this is seen as 'double-dipping'.

### **Recommendations:**

- Need for National Education Guidelines (including rights) for children with autism and other neurodevelopmental conditions.
- A commitment to and a national pathway towards a goal of inclusion in education.
- Enhance Autism-Specific Training: Mandatory autism-specific training for all educational staff to improve understanding and support strategies.
- Develop Inclusive Policies: Revise policies regarding suspensions, expulsions, and restrictive practices to ensure they support positive behavior and inclusion.
- Strengthen Support Networks: Establish stronger networks of support for families and educators, including access to specialists and resources.
- Implement Early Intervention: Expand access to and funding for early intervention programs to support children with disabilities from a young age.



- Enhance Regulatory Frameworks: Strengthen oversight mechanisms to protect the rights of children with disabilities and ensure schools are compliant with inclusive education standards.
- Adopt the Key Recommendations from the Disability Royal Commission: Actively work towards implementing the Commission's recommendations on inclusive education.
- Part-time, home-schooling and flexible schooling options are available for families.
- Specialist mobile inclusion and behaviour team who can be sent into schools with the most need to design individualised programs which will help with skill development and enable children with autism to remain enrolled and successfully learn.
- Specialist face-to-face help for rural and regional schools in order to train the staff in-vivo and implement telehealth systems for ongoing management of the situation.
- Specialist inclusion and behaviour support workers to replace the 'aide' system in state education departments.

### **Conclusion:**

Autism Awareness Australia believes that with targeted action, commitment, and resources, NSW can lead the way in providing a truly inclusive and supportive educational environment for all students, particularly those with autism. Our recommendations aim to address the systemic issues and barriers currently faced by students with disabilities and to ensure that all children and young people in NSW have access to the education and support they deserve. We are available and happy to help the NSW Government at any stage in their endeavour to achieve better outcomes for students with disabilities.

Kind Regards

Nicole Rogerson  
Executive Director  
Autism Awareness Australia