

Amaze Position Statement

Education

Key points:

- **Every autistic student has the right to a quality education and to access and participate in school on the same basis as students without disability.**
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- **Yet 97% of autistic students report experiencing educational restrictions and 35% do not complete Year 10 or above. Autistic students suffer socially and emotionally, and experience poor outcomes, when their learning and support needs are not met.**
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- **Autistic students should have access to an education system that provides an inclusive culture and a multi-faceted, individualised, needs based approach that is tailored to their strengths and unique learning styles.**
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- **Amaze recommends that:**
 - Australian governments increase awareness among schools and families of the rights and entitlements of students with disability.
 - The Victorian Government agree to all evidence informed recommendations arising out of the Victorian Parliament's *Inquiry into services for people with autism spectrum disorder* and *Review of the Program for Students with Disabilities* (including development of a new funding model based on strengths and functional needs).
 - Victorian schools, supported through policy guidance and funding by Australian governments, prioritise: building inclusive cultures through strong leadership and teaching excellence; individual needs and strengths based learning; adapting indoor and outdoor school environments to meet the sensory needs of autistic students; providing evidence informed support at times of transition; and ensuring robust data collection and reporting on education outcomes for all autistic students.

1. Background.

All autistic students should have access to an inclusive education system that welcomes diversity, meets their needs and enables them to fully participate and contribute: socially, emotionally and academically.

Internationally and within Australia, there is a comprehensive human rights legislative and policy framework that supports our nation's commitment to the rights and entitlements of students with disability to enjoy equal access to education.¹

In particular, the Commonwealth *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* and *Disability Standards for Education 2005* require education providers to ensure that students with disability have equal access and can participate 'on the same basis' as students without disability.

In Victoria, schools receive funding for adjustments for students with mild to moderate language and learning disabilities through the Schooling Resource Standard. Targeted (i.e. individualised) funding for students assessed as having moderate to high level support needs is also provided across all schools. However, the type of funding (including the amount, how it is spent and how to apply) varies across government and private schools, as well as mainstream and special schools. For example, in mainstream and special government schools, students with moderate to high level needs receive targeted funding through the Victorian Government's Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD).² Targeted funding is also available in Catholic schools, however it is administered by the Catholic Education Commission in Victoria under its Students with Disabilities program (and is applied differently to the PSD).³

2. Current experiences.

The school environment can be very challenging for autistic students, inside and outside of the classroom. This is due to the challenges autistic students face with communication, social interactions and their unique learning styles in an environment and system that, in many ways, is not designed with their needs in mind. Often individual strengths (for example, attention to detail, memory and visual perception) are not recognised or harnessed for learning.⁴

Evidence shows that autistic students are significantly more likely than their typically developing peers to be suspended or excluded⁵, targets of bullying⁶, to suffer depression and anxiety⁷ and to under-perform academically relative to their level of intelligence.⁸ Autistic students are often misunderstood and therefore not ideally supported or appreciated by educators, peers and the wider community.

In 2015, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reported that 97% of autistic students experienced educational restrictions, including a small number of autistic students who were unable to attend school 'because of their disability'.⁹ For those who were attending school, 48% attended either a special class in a mainstream school, or a special school and 84% reported 'having difficulty' at their place of learning (the majority having difficulty learning, communicating or fitting in socially).¹⁰

In 2015, 56% of young autistic people needed special tuition and 42% needed help from a counsellor or disability support person, while 20.7% didn't receive any additional assistance (excluding attending a special school or special classes in a mainstream school). Forty four percent of children indicated they needed more support or assistance at school than they were receiving.¹¹

Educational attainment rates for autistic students at primary and secondary school have not recently been measured, however contemporary data shows that 35% of people with disability do not go beyond Year 10 compared to 18% of people without disability.¹² Beyond school, educational attainment for autistic people is stark in comparison to the broader disability community and those without disability. It is clear from a number of recent reports and inquiries that the education system is not adequately meeting the specific learning and support needs of autistic students. This not only prevents them from achieving a level of educational attainment to which they are entitled, but also restricts their subsequent workforce and broader community participation with significant economic impact. Exclusion and bullying in school also has long term adverse impacts on mental health and community participation.¹³

3. What needs to be done?

A comprehensive approach, addressing each of the following areas of need, is urgently required to improve autistic students' access to education -

- **Strong leaders** (i.e. principals and senior staff): Leadership in implementing and modelling an inclusive culture is a key enabling factor to improving education outcomes for autistic students. Strong leaders recognise the benefits of inclusion, are committed to building an inclusive culture across the school (among staff and students) and thoroughly understand and accept the rights and entitlements of students with disability. They also continually strive to lead and develop a school that welcomes diversity, has high expectations of autistic students and meets all students' needs. To achieve this, principals and senior staff require ongoing professional development, combined with policy guidance on building, implementing and evaluating inclusive practices.¹⁴
- **Teacher excellence:** Ongoing professional development for teachers and education support staff (ESS) on autism, the benefits of inclusion and how to make reasonable and evidence informed adjustments to teaching practices is central to making schools more inclusive and improving outcomes for autistic students.¹⁵ Teachers also require ongoing training on how to best apply PSD funding and education support staff.¹⁶ Professional learning communities in schools can be particularly beneficial to foster a culture of teacher collaboration, shared learning and ongoing examination of what works to improve staff performance and student outcomes. To build school wide capacity to support autistic students, schools should be supported to employ autism trained itinerate teachers. The expertise of special school staff should be accessible by mainstream schools to build their school wide capacity, as well providing targeted support for students transitioning to mainstream schooling.
- **An individualised approach:** No single approach to learning can meet the needs of all autistic children. Regardless of where a child lives or their socio-economic circumstances, they must be able to access a school that meets their individual needs socially, emotionally and academically. They must be supported by a multi-faceted, individualised, needs based approach that is tailored to their strengths and unique learning style.¹⁷ A positive behaviour support plan should be embedded to prevent and manage challenging behaviours and behaviours of concern.
- **Individualised Learning Plans (ILP):** An ILP must be developed for all autistic students. It should be developed by the student's support group, including as appropriate: their teacher, parent or carer, relevant allied health professionals or other support people. It should be required to identify SMART goals, the supports and resources required to achieve those goals and specify set dates to review a student's progress and outcomes.¹⁸ ILPs should be regularly and independently audited to ensure educators are using training and guidelines effectively and consistently.¹⁹
- **Adequate funding:** Schools must be adequately funded to build their school wide capacity to understand and support the needs of autistic students. Adequate targeted funding is also essential for all autistic students, based on their strengths and support needs. While government schools in Victoria currently receive funding from the Commonwealth and Victorian governments to support students with disabilities (including targeted funding for many autistic students under the PSD) it is often inadequate to meet their support needs.²⁰ Autistic students with good language skills, but nevertheless requiring support with communication, social interactions and learning should not be excluded from receiving targeted funding under the PSD.
- **Built environment:** Many aspects of the built environment can play a role in supporting autistic students to be able to attend and participate in school life. This includes providing indoor and outdoor quiet and/or sensory spaces to support sensory regulation. Government guidance and ongoing funding to create such environments, based on inclusive best practice and universal design is vital to supporting engagement and participation in all aspects of school life.²¹

- **Transitions:** Autistic students can find transitions particularly challenging, often leading to increased levels of stress and anxiety.²² High levels of support are required for autistic students during these times, including starting school, from primary to secondary school and from secondary school to post-school options. Secondary school presents a far more challenging learning environment for autistic students with multiple teachers and classrooms, a heightened sensory environment, larger schools, less rigid routine, more demanding academic curriculum and an increase in social interactions. The transition process can also be made more difficult for autistic students attracting PSD funding, who following the eligibility review that occurs in Year 6, have the funding removed. Moving the PSD funding review from Year 6 to year 8 would allow students to adjust to their new school environment and ensure teachers have sufficient time to observe student's needs.
- **Reporting, transparency and accountability:** Reporting on education outcomes for autistic students is vital to ensuring transparency and accountability.²³ With reporting across Victorian schools currently scarce, there remains a lack of available data on the performance and outcomes of students with disabilities, as well as the validity and impact of funded interventions. It also means success cannot be measured and analysed at the school level or across the system in relation to student outcomes and the impact of support. Improved data collection, linkage and analysis would enable enhanced planning, reporting and accountability at the school, area, regional and state level.²⁴ It would also benefit schools, educators and taxpayers by demonstrating how their efforts and investment have translated into outcomes for students with disability.

If all of these factors were addressed in mainstream schools, the weight of evidence suggests that mainstream schooling would lead to the best social, emotional and academic outcomes for autistic students, compared to special or home schooling, and benefit all students.²⁵ The aspiration to provide a gold standard mainstream education to all autistic students, and indeed all students with disability, is reflected in the *United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*²⁶ and the *United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child*.²⁷

4. Recent reviews and government action.

Recently within Victoria and nationally there have been a number of inquiries directly relevant to the educational outcomes of autistic students.²⁸

Amaze has welcomed the Victorian Government's commitments following these reviews. In particular, its commitments, in response to the Review of Program for Students with Disabilities, to:

- Provide guidance and measures for building inclusive cultures in schools;
- Develop a strategy for capacity building and ensuring ongoing training for education staff (on autism and how to best respond to the specific learning needs of autistic students);
- Increase support to students at times of transition;
- Provide stronger guidance on ILPs;
- Develop and implement a stronger system of accountability, reporting and transparency of outcomes for all students with disabilities.

Amaze has also welcomed the Victorian Government's commitment, in response to the Inquiry into services for people with ASD – Final Report, to develop a State Autism Plan that will include a comprehensive education strategy for autistic students.²⁹ We will continue to monitor the implementation of these commitments, keeping the Government to account on their delivery and measuring their impact on outcomes for all autistic students.

Unfortunately there remain a number of findings and recommendations from the recent reviews that have not been adequately acted upon. Most notably in Victoria, numerous reports (i.e. *Greater returns on investment in Education: Government Schools Funding Review*, *Held back: The experiences of students with disabilities in Victorian schools – Analysis paper*, *Review of the Program for Students with Disabilities* and *Inquiry into services for people with ASD – Final Report*) have found that the current system and funding model is inadequate to provide the adjustments and supports required to meet the needs of Victorian students with disabilities.³⁰ Amaze is disappointed that the Victorian Government has not agreed to recommendations to reform the PSD criteria for funding and make PSD funding more equitable, targeted and based on strengths and functional need.³¹

Amaze will also continue its work across the education sector to close the current gaps for autistic students and ensure that all students have access to a truly inclusive education system. In particular, it will advocate strongly for a new funding model and other recent recommendations to be adopted by the Victorian government. It will also work with the Commonwealth Government to streamline assessments and eligibility to services across education, disability and health services.

5. Key Recommendations

Amaze recommends the following action across governments and schools to enable autistic students to access an education system that celebrates diversity, meets their needs and enables them to reach their full potential:

1. That Australian governments drive greater understanding, primarily through information and training for staff within the education system and parents and families, on the rights and entitlements of students with disability (particularly under the *Disability Standards for Education 2005*).
2. The Victorian Government should:
 - a. take immediate action on the commitments made in response to the *Review of the Program for Students with Disabilities*, (including to build inclusive cultures, strengthen staff capacity, provide guidance on ILPs and strengthen reporting and accountability) and ensure evaluation frameworks are in place to measure their effectiveness;
 - b. Agree to all evidence informed recommendations arising out of the Victorian Parliament's *Inquiry into services for people with autism spectrum disorder* and *Review of the Programs for Students with Disabilities*, including in regard to eligibility and the development of a new funding model based on a strengths based functional needs approach.
 - c. Agree to a new funding model that enables all autistic students in Victoria to access targeted funding under the PSD (the language score requirement should be removed) and provides a level of funding adequate to support their social, emotional and learning needs.
 - d. Reconsider moving the current review of PSD eligibility in Year 6 to Year 8.
 - e. Provide ongoing and adequate funding and guidance to schools to build "autism friendly environments", supporting self-regulation, engagement and full participation.
3. Supported through policy guidance and funding by Australian governments, Victorian schools should:
 - a. Prioritise an enabling and supportive culture of inclusion through strong leadership and teacher excellence, primarily through capacity building and ongoing training of all staff (including principals, teachers and ESS).
 - b. Provide all students with a multi-faceted, individualised, needs based approach, tailored to their strengths and unique learning style.
 - c. Ensure all autistic students have written ILPs developed by the student's support group, including SMART goals and the supports, resources required to achieve those goals and mechanisms for periodic reviews and independent audits.
 - d. Support the development of built environments in schools (including indoor and outdoor spaces) capable of meeting the sensory needs of autistic students and supporting their full participation in school life.
 - e. Provide high level, evidence informed support to autistic students at times of transition.
 - f. Prioritise robust data collection and reporting on education outcomes for autistic students.

Attribution:

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