

Education and Health Standing Committee
Parliament House 4 Harvest Terrace
WEST PERTH WA 6005
By email: laehsc@parliament.wa.gov.au

Dear Committee members,

Inquiry into support for Autistic children and young people in schools.

Thank you for your invitation to provide a submission to your *Inquiry into support for Autistic children and young people in schools*.

Amaze is based in Victoria and works to build community understanding of autism, influence policy change for autistic people and provide independent, credible information and resources to individuals, families, professionals, government and the wider community. We are closely connected with the Autistic community through our national Autism Connect helpline, peer support networks and community capacity building initiatives.

As part of our policy work, Amaze has worked closely with the Victorian government to identify and implement a range of policies and initiatives to improve the experiences and outcomes of Autistic students in Victoria's schools.

In response to your Terms of Reference 1 and 2, our submission provides data and evidence on the experiences and outcomes of Autistic students across Australia. In response to your Term of Reference 3, we provide an overview of, and learnings from Victoria's nation leading strengths-based Disability Inclusion reforms and Autism Education Strategy.

The experiences and outcomes of Autistic students in Australia.

There is a wealth of research identifying the benefits of inclusive education for Autistic students, including enhanced learning skills, social skills, independence, social and emotional wellbeing, and more positive life outcomes.^{i ii iii} However, many Autistic students continue to have poor experiences and outcomes. There is evidence that:

- Autistic students face an increased risk of under-performing academically, relative to their level of Intelligence.^{iv}
- Autistic students are significantly more likely than their non-autistic peers to be targets of bullying^v, and suffer depression and anxiety.^{vi}
- Autistic students, particularly those with complex behaviour support needs experience high rates of suspensions and exclusions from school or school events or activities, and can become caught in a cycle of suspensions, transfers between schools and reduced school hours.^{vii viii ix}



- Autistic students who use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) are frequently excluded and subjected to low expectations.^x
- Teacher knowledge about autism is limited: teachers report being unsure of how to best support autistic students.^{xi} There is evidence that teachers who have received some form of disability education are more likely to have positive attitudes to inclusion.^{xii}

Data reported by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) from 2018 demonstrated that:

- 40.8% of Autistic students attended a special class in a mainstream school or a special school.
- 77.7% of students experienced difficulties at school, most commonly - fitting in socially (59.8%), learning difficulties (55.3%) and communication difficulties (51.5%).
- 45.9% of Autistic students indicated that they needed more support or assistance at school than they were receiving.
- 32.4% of Autistic students do not make it past Year 10 (compared to 34.9% of all people with disability and 15.4% of people without a disability.)
- 8.1% of Autistic people had a Bachelor degree or higher (compared to 16.1% of people with a disability and 31.2% of people without disability).

Data broken down by states, to identify rates in WA will be available from the ABS.

Responses to surveys conducted by Amaze and other autism organisations in 2018 and 2020 were consistent with the ABS' findings.^{xiii xiv} Responses to these surveys also indicated that:

- Autistic students receive inadequate adjustments and modifications to curriculum, assessments and exam conditions, as well as inadequate access to education aids.^{xv}
- Many Autistic students change schools multiple times, with these rates doubling from primary school (24%) to secondary school (44%) as students' needs remain unmet.^{xvi}
- Over 10% of students undertake their schooling in a flexible learning enrolment, or via home schooling or distance education.^{xvii}

Learnings from Victoria's strengths-based reforms to improve the experiences and outcomes of Autistic students.

Victoria has recently launched a suite of nation leading reforms to improve schooling for Autistic students. We encourage you to follow Victoria's lead by introducing wholistic reforms that are: strengths based; neuro-affirming; support partnerships between students, families and schools; build the capacities of schools and teachers to support Autistic students; and aim to improve the learning, health and wellbeing outcomes of all Autistic students. We also encourage you to draw on learnings from the roll out of these reforms to ensure their impacts

are measured, students and their families are empowered to be involved in all inclusion processes and any reforms are rolled out equally across all schools.

For many years, Autistic students in Victorian schools have been eligible for national and Victorian government funding. Nationally, school-wide funding is provided to support quality teaching practices and create inclusive schools.^{xviii} At a state level, since 2005, individualised weighted funding has been available for Autistic students that meet the criteria under Victoria's Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD).^{xix} The PSD is now in the process of being replaced by a new strengths-based funding model under Victoria's Disability Inclusion reforms.^{xx}

The Disability Inclusion Reforms package is being introduced over a staged rollout between 2021 to 2025, at a cost to government of \$1.6 billion. The new individualised funding model presents a welcome shift from what has previously been a very deficits-based funding model under the PSD. Through the reforms, schools will also be eligible for school wide funding to promote more inclusive school environments and practices.

In 2020, Victoria's Autism Education Strategy was launched under the revised State Disability Plan, and as part of Victoria's Disability Inclusion Reforms, with a commitment of more than \$19 million to deliver the strategy over 4 years.²² The Strategy highlights six pillars to increase support for Autistic students and build the capacity for education providers to meet the needs of Autistic students.

- Pillar one: Promote and celebrate autism inclusion and diversity at the whole school level.
- Pillar two: Build the capability of school leaders and staff to meet the educational needs of autistic students.
- Pillar three: Involve the student, families and experts in collaboratively planning for students' education.
- Pillar four: Support autistic students' health and wellbeing.
- Pillar five: Support autistic students' individual education needs.
- Pillar six: Strengthen accountability and transparency for students with disability.

Together, the Disability Inclusion Reforms and Autism Education Strategy provide a Diverse Learners Hub, support professional learning initiatives, require the development of student disability inclusion profiles, guide student support groups and education plans, provide peer support for Autistic students, establish autism education advisory groups and support the building of inclusive schools. For example:

- The Diverse Learners Hub provides frontline coaching to educators, develops resources to strengthen support, encourages capacity building, and ensures that learners' needs are addressed and aligned with the six critical areas of the strategy. It also ensures that these services, supports, and resources are accessible across regional and rural Victoria.

- Student Disability Inclusion Profiles are required to help schools and families identify students' strengths and needs, as well as the educational adjustments schools can make to help students with disability. The profile is developed by the student, their family, school staff and others as appropriate.
- Individual Education Plans must describe the adjustments, goals and strategies required to meet a student's needs. They also exist as Koorie Education Learning Plans for First Nations students with disability. The plans are strength-based and include short-term goals that are aimed at supporting the achievement of long-term goals. Plans are reviewed once a term.
- Professional development initiatives have been introduced to enable teachers to complete post-graduate studies in inclusive education at a Certificate or Masters level (with scholarships available). Courses have been designed to focus on inclusion and specific learning difficulties. They are offered through major universities such as the University of Melbourne, Monash University, Deakin, and the Autism Teaching Institute.²³
- The I CAN mentoring program provides support and mentoring for Autistic students across 100 government schools and inclusion outreach coaching that supports schools in integrating inclusive education practices, with coaches employed through specialist schools. Recent evaluations of these programs demonstrate that they are having a positive impact by improving social and communication skills, building connections and a sense of belonging and building self-confidence and self-acceptance.^{xxi xxii}

These reforms are a welcome shift and have the capacity to greatly improve the experiences and outcomes of Victoria's Autistic students (and indeed all Victorian students).

Early learnings from the roll out of these reforms include that:

- Targets for change, and transparent outcome measures across key indicators need to be embedded to measure the effectiveness of the reforms for Autistic students. For example, indicators need to include increasing Year 12 completion rates, increasing the rate of uptake of further and higher education, increasing the proportion of Autistic students sustaining their enrolment in school and decreasing the rate of disciplinary absences, suspensions and exclusionary practices.
- Inclusion processes, such as student support group meetings and goal setting, must be supported to be accessible and inclusive for all students and families. For example, information and resources co-designed by Autistic students, their families and the autism community are required to ensure all students and their families can participate.
- Equal access to supports must be provided across all schools. For example, by ensuring that initiatives such as the Autistic led I Can Network's peer support and mentoring programs are available across all schools and not subject to a slow roll out.

We encourage you to meet with the Victorian Government to hear more about these important initiatives and their learnings so far. We also encourage you to engage with the I Can Network about their peer support and mentoring program.

If you have any questions arising from this submission or we can provide further information, please contact Nicole Antonopoulos, Policy Consultant to Amaze at Nicole.antonopoulos@amaze.org.au.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jim Mullan', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Jim Mullan
Chief Executive Officer

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