

Inquiry into the Australian Education Amendment Bill 2017

Introduction

Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect) submits the following evidence to the Inquiry into the Australian Education Amendment Bill 2017.

Aspect congratulates the Australian Government for proposing a sector blind, fairer, needs based funding model in the Australian Education Amendment Bill 2017. Aspect operates eight schools in New South Wales and one school in South Australia for students on the autism spectrum. In total there are approximately 1,100 students enrolled in Aspect schools in Sydney, the Hunter, Central Coast, South Coast, North Coast and Riverina areas of New South Wales and Adelaide in South Australia.

As an independent special school provider, Aspect provides an intensive autism specific program to support the particular educational challenges faced by students on the autism spectrum.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

All individuals on the autism spectrum are identified with (1) impairments in social communication and social interaction, (2) restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities, in some cases

including hyper or hypo-reactivity to sensory input (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). People on the autism spectrum may possess relative strengths in visual-spatial processing, rote memory and attention to detail, yet experience difficulties with flexible thinking, planning and organisation.

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

Aspect schools use the Aspect Comprehensive Approach for Education (ACAE) as an intensive autism-specific education approach. The primary focus of Aspect schools is to equip students with the skills to become as independent as possible and to enable them to transition into the wider community wherever possible.

At times in a student's development, a student may need a more intensive program. Aspect ACAE program develops students' skills for continued education in the wider community, maximise their learning potential and ability to adapt and develop a students' self-regulatory abilities and independence. Once these skills have developed, a student is able to transition to a less intensive education setting. Approximately 20% of Aspect's total student population transition annually to less intensive settings.

Currently the average cost of educating a student in an Aspect school is approximately \$50,000 per annum. Income is derived from a combination of sources of government funding and parent contribution.

Any amendments to funding needs to take into account the special circumstances of operating an independent special school. These schools play an important part in the range of schooling options available for students with disabilities. Educating students on the autism spectrum is not a one size fits all approach. Aspect schools give parents a choice of school options for their child.

Amendments to funding need to consider the increased cost of operating a special school. Special schools have higher costs for staffing (low teacher student ratios and more support staff and therapists) and higher infrastructure costs.

The Australian Education Amendment Bill 2017 proposes the disability loading will be changed to three formulas that reflect the three highest levels of adjustment required for a student with disability used in the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data for students with a disability (NCCD). It is suggested that this will better reflect the differing costs of providing school education for the differing level of adjustment.

The NCCD was introduced as a count of students with disability across Australia states and territories. Historically different states and territories had different definitions of disability. Until the introduction of the NCCD Australia had been unable to give a nationally consistent count of the number of students with disability being educated in Australian schools.

To collect the data the NCCD relies on the judgement of the teachers. Through the collection, teachers make decisions about the level of adjustment being provided for each student with a disability. While professional learning and support is provided to teachers and schools, the level of adjustment for each student is based on their judgement.

As reported in the "2016 emergent data on students in Australian schools receiving adjustments for disability" (Education Council Report, 2017), the collection is still in the early stages of implementation, with 2016 being only the second year in which almost all schools have participated in the collection. It will take time to embed understanding of the collection model across all Australian schools and ensure accuracy and consistency in decision-making. The results show some variability across states, territories, and sectors. Until the quality of the data improves, the data cannot be directly compared.

The Australian Education Amendment Bill 2017 has changed the student with disability loading to be directly related to the NCCD and the levels of adjustment. This method of collecting data on students with disabilities was conceived solely as count of students and will now be linked to directly funding. The Education Council Report is stating that the data is unreliable and yet the Australian Education Amendment Bill 2017 will link this data to funding.

Aspect remains committed to a needs based funding model to ensure that students on the autism spectrum have equitable access to schooling options, however linking funding to unreliable data that is based on teacher judgement needs to be reviewed.

Conclusion

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

No one single approach will be effective for all students across the autism spectrum. Therefore, a range of educational programs and services are required to meet the needs of this unique population of Australian students.

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

The Australian Government is to be commended for proposing a sector blind, fairer, needs based funding model that will support all students in Australian school including those with a disability. To develop a methodology of the Student with Disability loading, Aspect believes using the NCCD is ill conceived. A data collection tool, that was formulated as a consistent count of students that relies on teacher judgement will not provide accurate data. The loading needs to take into account the variety of settings that student with a disability are educated, including a special school setting with the higher operational costs. Aspect would suggest that a different methodology is developed that will more accurately meet the needs of the students and schools.

References

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Attachment List

1. Aspect Comprehensive Approach for Education (ACAE)
2. Where are they now? - A long-term follow-up study of students with autism graduating from Autism Spectrum Australia's (Aspect) satellite classes

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Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect) operates an education program which uses the Aspect Comprehensive Approach for Education (ACAE) as the basis of all teaching and learning across Aspect schools and the Aspect Education Outreach program. The ACAE is a specialised educational approach to teaching students on the autism spectrum and has been developed over 50 years in the field.

The ACAE includes a specialised curriculum with a focus on skills development underpinned by individual assessment and planning. The approach recognises the important role of transactional supports and includes environmental supports, structured learning, positive behaviour supports and a focus on mental health and wellbeing for students, staff and families. System supports include professional development, a Learning Support Team approach and family involvement. Aspect endorses a collaborative approach to support successful student transition to more inclusive educational placements that prepares both the students and the receiving school.

Aspect's Comprehensive Educational Approach acknowledges that within a set of standard procedures and core curriculum, different teaching tools, interventions and techniques may be used at different times during a person's development. The approach also recognises the transactional and interactive nature of autism, whereby the learning environment, curriculum, and persons interacting with the individual all influence their development. The Aspect Comprehensive Approach for Education aims to:


- Develop a student's skills to facilitate education and ongoing participation in the wider community
- Maximise each individual's learning potential and adaptive functioning
- Develop students' self-regulatory abilities and independence.

Intervention takes place in multiple settings including home, school and the community. The approach is based on ongoing reference to multiple sources of information including empirical research, evidence-based practice and the autobiographical perspectives of persons on the autism spectrum and may therefore be inclusive of other interventions.

The five principles that underpin the ACAE

1. It is applicable to all students on the autism spectrum.
2. Interventions support all areas of the student's development and are based on assessment and evaluation of individual needs.
3. The approach is positive and supportive rather than a deficit approach, acknowledging the learning style, strengths and interests of students on the autism spectrum.
4. The approach involves co-operation and collaboration between parents/carers and professionals.
5. The approach is based on ongoing reference to research and clinical literature and may therefore be inclusive of other interventions.

The key elements of Aspect's Comprehensive Educational Approach, (outlined in **Attachment 1**) accord with recommendations found in comprehensive reviews of research and evidence-based practice. The key elements are:

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1. Individualised Planning
 2. Curriculum
 3. Environmental Supports
 4. Structured Teaching Approaches
 5. Positive Behaviour Support (PBS)
 6. Mental Health & Wellbeing
 7. Supported Transition and Inclusion
 8. Learning Support Team (LST)
 9. Family Involvement & Support
 10. Professional Learning

Autism Spectrum Disorder Evaluative Education (ASDEE) Model

Aspect is committed to implementing and continuously improving Aspect's Comprehensive Educational Approach. As a result of the continuous development of the ACAE, Aspect has developed the Autism Spectrum Disorder Evaluative Education (ASDEE) model that underpins the continuous improvement of Aspect's education program. The ASDEE model was developed over 5 years of research in Aspect schools as a result of the implementation of the ACAE and provides:

- A model for evaluating education programs in Aspect schools
- A workflow model to support teachers and researchers
- Evaluation and implementation of educational interventions
- Bridging of the research to practice gap.

ACAE Continuous Improvement Self-Review Framework

The embedding of all elements of the approach in all Aspect schools is ensured by the Continuous Improvement Self-Review Framework. The Framework includes an internal self-review and an audit that all Aspect schools are expected to undertake. The main aims of the review are to:

- Improve the quality, consistency and standards of education for students on the autism spectrum
- Support new and existing staff in Aspect schools to understand and implement the ACAE
- Ensure compliance with Australian Curriculum and State curricula requirements
- Prepare students in Aspect schools for national testing including NAPLAN
- Support and underpin the requirements for Registration and Accreditation of teachers.

The overview of the review should also consider the five principles that underpin the ACAE and ensure these principles are infused in the philosophy of the school.

Appendix 1





Where are they now?

A long-term follow-up study of students with autism graduating from Autism Spectrum Australia's (Aspect) satellite classes

Key Personnel; Dr Elaine Keane (Aspect)

Project Summary

This summary outlines the findings of a research study undertaken to ascertain whether Autism Spectrum Australia's (Aspect) satellite class program is achieving its core goal of successful long-term outcomes for students with ASDs in more inclusive educational placements. Satellite classes are ASD-specific classes for five-six students operated by Aspect in mainstream education 'host' schools. The aim of the model is to provide a stepping-stone for students with ASDs to transition to more inclusive educational placements. The satellite class program commenced in 1992 and there are currently 73 satellite classes in mainstream schools.

The first stage of the research comprised a survey questionnaire sent to families of students who had graduated from satellite classes between 1994-2002; the second stage utilised a multiple-case study design to obtain comprehensive, qualitative data for a smaller group of satellite class graduates.

122 questionnaires were distributed to families with a response rate of 52% (N = 63). Results revealed that 70% of students entered a satellite class during kindergarten, the remainder in grades 1 – 4. The mean length of stay was 22 months. 70% of the students transitioned to regular classes, 28.5% to non-ASD specific support classes in regular schools and 1.5% to a school for students with a moderate degree of intellectual disability. 94% of families reported their child received transition support from Aspect. 92% of families reported that receiving schools developed specialised educational support during the year following transition, which gradually decreased over the years.

At the time of the research, 78% of students who transitioned to support classes were in similar placements, 11% in more supported options and 11% in more inclusive placements (regular class). 89% of graduates who transitioned directly to regular classes were still in similar placements. 92% of parents reported their satisfaction with the satellite class program as good to excellent.

Parent satisfaction (N = 63)

Service	Excellent	Very good	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory
Aspect Satellite class program	42	13	3	3	2
Transition planning from satellite class	26	16	12	4	5
School following transition from satellite class	15	25	7	11	5
Current educational/work placement	13	20	13	11	6

Analysis of the optional comments part of the survey suggested three key themes; 1) the value of satellite classes as providing a firm foundation for their child's development, 2) the ongoing importance of collaboration between staff at all periods of their child's education and between parents and educators, and 3) issues around secondary schooling such as planned transition from primary school, teacher knowledge of autism and the increasing importance of social skills and the influence of the peer group.

Four young adults, whose parents had given prior consent to participate in the second stage of the investigation, were selected in sequential order of graduation to be involved in the case studies. This methodology derived insight into the experiences of the earliest satellite class graduates who had transitioned over a decade previously. The broad findings conform to the statistical data from the parent survey, in that the four students entered the satellite class between the ages of four and a half and five and a half, were enrolled an average of 18 months and graduated to regular classes in grade one or two.

The case studies also provide a more detailed account of the students' progress, current functioning and quality of life. The four students made rapid progress in satellite classes; progress with language, communication and social skills were remarked on particularly by parents, and intellectual ability tested in the average or above range. Analysis suggested that the provision of information on the child and on ASD to the receiving school staff appeared to promote the utilisation of appropriate support strategies following transition from the satellite class. Student progress was maintained throughout primary school; albeit with some ups and downs in one case, when he changed primary schools. In high school three students made even better progress, two especially in social terms.

At the time the research was conducted when the young people were aged 19 or 20-years-old, three had completed their HSC, two of them were enrolled in tertiary education and the third working full-time prior to going to a further education college. The fourth

young man had left high school at the end of grade 9, mainly due to anxiety caused by teasing and bullying. To his credit, after some employment training and work he returned to his studies and at age 20 is completing his HSC at a senior college, where his parents report he is better supported, secure and happier about his life. Two of the other young people have also had full or part-time employment before and/or during their tertiary studies. Two of the young men have a wide circle of friends from school, university and outside interests. The other two have fewer social groups but have interests and get on with people at college/university. One of the young men also has a girlfriend. Perhaps one of the most surprising elements was just how well three of the young people described friendship in terms of trust and companionship. All also have interests and have obtained drivers' licences.

The findings of the research appear to endorse the satellite class model. 92% of parents who completed the survey reported their satisfaction with the satellite class program as good to excellent. The value of satellite class placement was also noted in the optional comments on the survey and was one of the key factors that were deemed to contribute to student progress across all four in-depth case studies. An overwhelming majority of satellite class graduates maintain a similar type of placement in the long-term to that accessed on transition.

The research results also support the theory (Howlin, 2005), which suggests factors that predict success in adulthood for more able individuals with ASDs may involve language and social skills, educational support, peer support, family support and specific skills that allow individuals to find their 'niche' in life and that it is likely to be a combination of these factors. The acquisition of social and communication skills, strong support throughout school and a supportive peer network all contributed to the sense of wellbeing of the young men involved in the case studies. In particular, the importance of carefully planned educational transitions and collaboration between special and regular educators and with parents were highlighted.

"I suppose my social life has just gone off the charts". He has several groups of friends, those from university, those who share musical interests, his soccer friends and a few old school friends he "still catches up with". He suggested that with close friends, as opposed to acquaintances there was a bond and trust, "where you would feel comfortable talking about your private life or secrets". Tom aged 20.

Case study

TOM

Tom¹ was aged 20 years and 8 months at time of interviews and had graduated from a satellite class 14 years previously. He had recently commenced his third year at university on a full-time basis.

Early history

During early childhood Tom was referred for developmental assessment due to concerns about his lack of speech and social and behavioural issues. He was identified with autism and a mild degree of developmental delay at age three-years-old. Following diagnosis he received home visits from Aspect early intervention teachers, attended pre-school part-time and received speech therapy. He subsequently enrolled in an Aspect school part-time for one year from age four and a half.

Satellite class

Whilst Tom had made good progress, when he transferred to a satellite class at age five and a half his language was delayed and he was shy and withdrawn; his IEP prioritised these areas. Reading ability was used to aid verbal comprehension and facilitate social skills. His class participated in afternoon small group activities with the kindergarten. Within 12 months Tom made significant gains in language and IQ testing revealed he was in the average range of ability. With increasing time spent in the mainstream he was beginning to respond to his peers and the kindergarten and first grade teachers remarked on what a delightful, amenable child he was.

Tom's parents elected to keep him in the school where the satellite class was located as they fairly lived close by and he had begun to make some friends at the school. The teachers worked closely and Tom spent more and more time in the first grade class until he enrolled full time mid-year after 18 months in the satellite class.

Primary and secondary school

Tom made good progress through primary and secondary school and teacher aide support was not provided after first grade. He got on well with teachers and was liked by his classmates. Tom received many school awards for his attitude and achievement at high school. When it came to the Higher School Certificate (HSC), the only special assistance he received was some tuition on writing techniques from the

special education teacher. During primary school, Tom sometimes played with peers in the playground, peers were invited to play at his home and vice versa, and he participated in extra-curricular activities. Tom was involved in more social interaction, had more friends and wider circle than during childhood and was involved in a range of extra-curricular and leisure activities.

Current

Tom did well in the HSC and at the time of the interview was undertaking third year Bachelor of Arts degree/Diploma of Education. Tom spoke clearly and eloquently about university. He particularly enjoyed the special education units and believed he possessed the insights to be able to teach children with autism. He found university completely different to high school. "To be honest with you, I absolutely love it" – It had also been good getting to know people with different values and attitudes.

Tom has had a part-time job as a retail assistant for three years and drives himself to work and university. He has a range of sporting, musical and recreational activities and the move to university heralded another broadening of his social network.

He suggested that with close friends, as opposed to acquaintances there was a bond and trust, "where you would feel comfortable talking about your private life or secrets". Tom also has a girlfriend who he met at university and has been seeing for several months. Throughout the interview Tom sounded natural and displayed good conversational ability and awareness of the listeners' perspective.

Factors in Tom's progress

Tom's parents suggested that the major factor that contributed to his progress was their commitment and involvement. This included his early speech therapy, community access, involvement in team sports and encouraging friends to visit. A second factor was enrolment in the satellite class – "After he started in the satellite class it just seemed to click" – he had benefited from the language rich learning environment, intervention for social skills and time spent in the regular class. It was also evident that Tom's parents had a good working relationship with his primary and secondary school teachers. Finally, a developing social network has provided support, interest and companionship.

¹ Pseudonym

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The Aspect vision for research

Aspect is committed to improving the lives of individuals with ASDs through service provision and research. As the largest ASD-specific service provider in the country and one of the largest in the world, Aspect is well positioned to facilitate and conduct research. Aspect undertakes and supports research to evaluate Aspect's and other programs, practices and interventions in order to provide improved services and interventions for children and adults with ASDs. Aspect also promotes research at state and national levels and facilitates tertiary students' research. As our mission is to develop our knowledge of what can be done to support individuals with ASDs, research findings will also make a significant contribution to the field of international research into ASDs. Aspect requires ongoing funding to support these key initiatives and is always keen to talk to potential new partners and donors.



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For further information please go to the Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect) website:

www.autismspectrum.org.au/research

To make a donation to the Aspect Research Program please contact: Aspect

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