



# The Autistic Realm Australia Inc. School Cant Submission

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*Diversity is Autistic Reality.*



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### TRIGGER WARNING:

**The stories of student and parental experiences reported by our respondents and quoted in this submission may be distressing. Please practise good self-care as you read this document.**

The Autistic Realm Australia Inc. (TARA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate inquiry on The national trend of school refusal and related matters. We would appreciate the opportunity to further contribute by giving evidence at a public hearing.

This submission is founded on the contributions of Autistic parents and parents of Autistic children , collected by our survey in November-December 2022. We define School to include the gamut of formal in-person education activities ((expanded below).

'School Can't has been experienced by Autistic students for some time - much longer than by the general cohort of students, and long before the Covid 19 pandemic.

As a Not for Profit, TARA has been supporting Autistic children and their families since 2019; our online community has been supporting them since 2016. For many parents the diagnosis of their child is their first experience of Autism. Parents come to our parent group to learn from the practical experience of Autistic adults and our children.

Our most frequently asked question is about supporting children who for a myriad of reasons are unable to attend school. TARA and the parents in our group are very familiar with the long-term harm to children and families who experience School Can't. we know how challenging it is to parent a child who is different, who does not meet milestones, who is bullied, who desperately wants friends who explodes in the classroom and attacks teachers who has been suspended or expelled – or not expelled, but "encouraged" out of a school.

The Autistic Realm Australia Inc. is a peer advocacy and support organisation run by and for Autistics.

TARA aims to improve the lives of Autistic people by honouring the strengths and experiences of Autistics through educating ourselves and others, shaping research and policy, and facilitating connections.

We honour Diversity as Autistic Reality, acknowledging and supporting all of our members whatever their history, expression of identity or support needs. We try to practise Radical Inclusion in all aspects of our work. We abide by the human rights model of disability.

Our board is composed of Autistic Parents and Autistic Professionals from the Community Service, Education, Health, Corporate and Small Business sectors. The majority of our board are also Autism CRC Future Leader Alumni <sup>1</sup>

Our membership base includes people with physical, intellectual and other disabilities, people from First Nations countries and recent immigrants to Australia, as well as people across the spectrums of gender and sexuality.

Our findings indicate that schools are not meeting the needs of students with School Can't, and they take very little responsibility for helping the child and their family to overcome School Can't. Negative responses of all kinds were reported. Harmful practices were reported repeatedly. Parents described children in crisis and families under extreme stress. Our Recommendations below outline changes that must be made to alleviate this situation.

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<sup>1</sup> You can read more about our organisation at: [www.tara.org.au](http://www.tara.org.au)

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## OUR POSITION

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### ► Definition - School

We define School to include the gamut of formal in-person education activities

1. At a specific location - the school buildings
2. At specific times - approximately 8am to 3.30pm
3. For a full day, full week, full term and full year

### ► Definition - School Can't

When TARA designed our survey on School Can't we looked for the clearest, most extensive description we could find. The definition we chose was adapted by TARA Inc., from the Beyond Blue resource, Understanding School Refusal: This is it in full:

School Can't is not the same as truancy - sometimes called 'wagging school' or 'bunking off'.

Truancy is when the student pretends to parents/carers/guardians that they attend school, when they do not.

School Can't is when students do not hide their unwillingness to go to school or that they are not attending. Parents/carers/guardians of a child who experiences School Can't know that their child is not at school.

School Can't may appear in different ways. It could look like a student who does any of the following:

- refuses to attend school, or has problems remaining in class for a whole day and/or
- has extended times away from school
- has occasional days away from school
- misses classes
- attends class but does not do the class activities
- is almost always late for school or class
- constantly begs to miss school
- shows illness, pain, or worry about attending school
- experiences an intense stress or anxiety just at the idea of going to school
- has parents/ carers/ guardians who know they are away from school because of school refusal
- does not try to hide missing school from their parents/ carers/ guardians

School Can't is most often related to mental health concerns, especially worry or anxiety. Other causes include lack of support for sensory needs, unmet needs for adapted learning goals and content, lack of

suitable support in the classroom, and lack of positive relationships with other members of the school community.”<sup>2</sup>

School Can't is about much more than attendance. And this list is not complete. There may be other examples.

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## UNDERSTANDING AUTISM

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### ► Support

- All Autistic people require some level of support to thrive in a non-Autistic world
- Ranking Autistic people (with ‘levels’ of ‘severity’) prevents us reaching our potential to live meaningful lives, through denial of support and/or opportunity
- Support level needs change according to the environment and the threat versus comfort level.

### ► Autism And Skills

- Only Autistic people are “on the spectrum”: tThe spectrum visually describes the skill profile of Autistic individuals.
- No two Autistics have the same skill profile. Autistic skills are asynchronous and vary within the same person. Intellectual skills are separate from adaptive life skills. An Autistic person’s skill profile is not static and will vary day to day. Nor are they linear.

### ► Behaviour Is Information

- All behaviour serves a purpose, therefore Autistic behaviour serves a purpose: Some Autistic behaviours are signals of distress, not “symptoms” of Autism.
- Distress behaviours may be an attempt to regulate, not attempts to manipulate.

### ► Trauma And Autism

- Most Autistic people experience trauma: School is a significant site of trauma
- Behavioural interventions address symptoms without solving the underlying cause.

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<sup>2</sup> This is the preamble to our survey. You can see the whole instrument in the Appendices

## ► Presentations Of Autism

- PDA is a sub-profile of Autism. It is a pervasive drive for autonomy. PDA is rooted in an anxiety-based need for control. This trait is shared by many Autistics.
- Individuals who present with PDA
- Are driven to avoid everyday demands and expectations to an extreme extent. This may include getting up, attending school, joining a family activity or other day to day suggestions.
- May be driven to avoid demands and expectations even when they want to do what has been suggested.
- Many co-occurring conditions can often be present in Autistic people.

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## EVOLUTIONS OF THE MODEL OF DISABILITY

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There are three main lenses used to look at disability: The medical model, the social model, and the human rights model.

### ► The Medical Model

The Medical model focuses on disability as a personal problem or deficiency - e.g., the DSM5-TR lists autism as a neurodevelopmental disorder; not as a mental disorder, but it still sees it as a disorder, or something that needs to be fixed.

### ► The Social Model

The Social model shifts the focus from disability as an individual problem, to disability as the product of the environment the individual is in. This model seeks to create a more equitable society by providing equal opportunities and assistance for all. Our survey shows that some schools use this model to support Autistic students to be a fuller part of the school community. It is progress, but it is still a limited approach.

## ► The Human Rights Model

The Human Rights Model, which we advocate goes a step further in establishing the right of disabled people to live independently and be included in the community, and the obligation on governments to provide support and correct inequities that prevent this inclusion.

As Autistic Adults we understand the challenges posed by finding and maintaining meaningful and engaging education. In this spirit we recommend as follows:

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# RECOMMENDATIONS

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## ► A. Our Position

1. As a matter of human rights and social justice, Autistic-led groups such as TARA must be included as representatives of the Autistic community, Including the voice of the child as per Article 12.1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child ratified by Australia 17 December 1990
2. At all levels of decision-making about School Can't, in co-design, development and evaluation
3. Inclusion without equity is just assimilation: equitable presence at school for all students must be made the norm, to support all young Australians at risk of educational disadvantage.
4. That all education policies and standards are developed with a Universal Design for Learning approach that is strengths-based and trauma-informed, to support Human Rights, Intersectionality, Identity as a culture, Gender & Gender diversity.

## ► B. School Can't

5. Recognise that the phenomenon of children struggling or being unable to attend school is not school refusal (i.e., won't!), but as actual inability or School Can't. Current refusal-based understandings and practices are lacking and harmful and abrogate the responsibility of the school which is causing the problem.

6. Government must include the issue of the use of suspensions and expulsions, as a factor contributing to School Can't, in the Terms of Reference in the current Senate Enquiry into Disruption in School.
7. Create a national standard definition of School Can't which recognises the delicate balance between the need to go to school and the threat some students experience of going to school.
8. Make the collection and retention of statistics about School Can't mandatory at every level - both federal and state and across all types of institutions, departments and staff. Issues revealed by the statistics must be actioned. As part of this data, statistics must be collected on child differences, including Autism and mental health. This information is to be reported annually to state and federal education departments for action. Reports to be made to parliament and be publicly available on the federal education department website, broken down state-by-state.
9. Recognise and accept that School Can't is caused by schools and arises from not meeting the needs of children, including Autistic children. These needs include but are not limited to the need to feel safe, as well as sensory, emotional, developmental, intellectual etc needs.
10. The Productivity Commission should be requested to investigate the social and economic cost of School Can't, including the gender bias and effects on workplace participation and work-life balance, loss of income and make such recommendations as they see necessary.

### ► C. School And School Systems

11. Schools must move away from behavioural responses as 'treatment' for School Can't. This lazy response locates the problem with the child and their family; it is used by schools to abrogate responsibility for finding alternative solutions.
12. To enable equitable presence for all students, formal schooling must include more flexible options as a matter of course, e.g., partial enrollment, part-time schooling, mixed-mode schooling, work from home options, schooling and outreach programmes for students engaged in mental health services, etc .
13. Improve access to mental health resources via schools must be funded.
14. Schools must embed Trauma Informed Practices in all areas of service delivery to cater for School Can't students to avoid retraumatising them when they return to school.

### ► D. Our Model

15. To reduce conditions that cause School Can't, provide Autism-friendly support for transitions, e.g. from kindergarten to primary school. This includes intra-school transitions, e.g., across school campuses.

16. To avoid further isolation of children and their families all schools must set up an Autistic community group and hold regular scheduled meetings and appointments for feedback with principals and staff. As a matter of equity, an Autistic person should lead the group. In the absence of an Autistic parent, non-Autistic leaders (liaising with an Autistic led organisation such as TARA) may be considered. The group must be leaders or equal partners in decision-making on all matters pertaining to Autistic students in that school including funding.
17. Mandate minimum requirements for qualification, employment and continuing teacher registration to include compulsory pre-service training and continuing professional development for teachers, principals *and staff who manage schools* in, at a minimum: child development, School Can't, trauma, being Autistic, inclusion and equity in practice.
18. Continue to support the flexible delivery options that were available during COVID. These have already been developed, tested and shown to work for many School Can't students, Autistic and non-Autistic.
19. Establish better and more cohesive school-based support systems for School Can't students and their families.
20. Develop a standard response to School Can't, i.e. a model that is followed, accountable and measurable, as follows:
  - a. Locate the schools that have an equitable culture and presume competence of all students with disability which affords them the right to an inclusive education. These are the practices that minimise School Can't.
  - b. Use their example to develop a mandatory standard policy and practice.
  - c. Roll out the model nationally.

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## CONCLUSION

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### ► Survey In Brief

We shared the survey in all the TARA communities and via social media and other autistic led organisations. We expected 50-60 responses. Instead, we received 245, in a 2-week period, which referred to 457 children from parents and carers of Autistic children who have experienced or continue to experience School Can't.

It is a matter of some discontent among our respondents that when allistic students needed flexible options due to COVID, flexible learning was provided simply as a matter of course. Both the wider disability community and the Autistic communities have been fighting tooth and nail for years for the same consideration.



*“Child 2 had supports in first and second years of school then had everything taken away because they started speaking in class and made a friend, so it was deemed no longer Autistic enough to require anything by the school support staff and **looks fine now**”.*

This quotation echoes the sentiments and experience that pervade our qualitative data. For two families’ accounts of their School Can’t journeys, please see the Appendices.

You will also find the questions we asked our respondent and the quantitative results in the Appendices.

We have not shared the qualitative data, but the responses contain a clear sense of desperation to improve the situation for respondents’ children and a strong need to be heard. We would welcome the opportunity to present this powerful testimony, and the solutions that have worked for our families, to the Senate Committee.

## APPENDICES

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### ► Appendix 1 – School Can't Survey Instrument

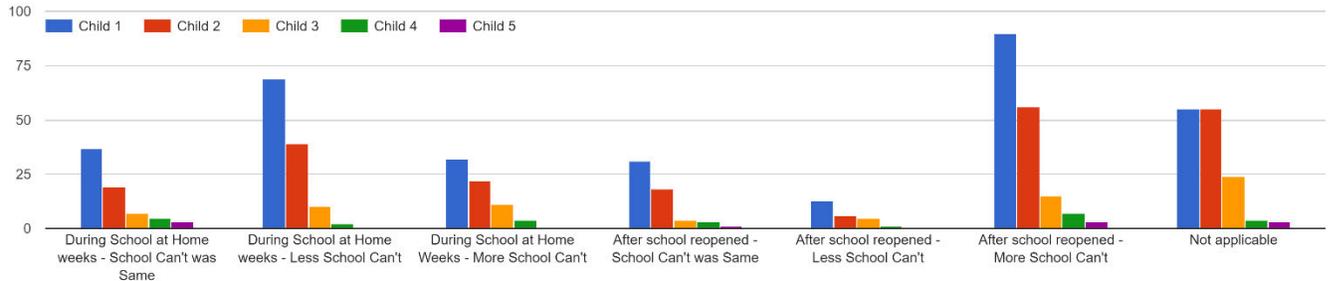
1. Has your family experienced School Can't?
2. Are you a parent, carer or guardian?
3. How many children (of any age) do you have?
4. Are your children Autistic?
5. As well as Autism, do your children have other diagnoses, conditions, disabilities or neurodiversities?
  - ADHD
  - Intellectual Disability
  - Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)
  - Dyslexia and/or Dyscalculia
  - Dysgraphia
  - Dyspraxia/ Developmental Co-ordination Disorder (DCD)
  - Depression
  - Anxiety
  - Bipolar
  - Schizophrenia
  - Borderline Personality Disorder
  - Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
  - Chronic illness/autoimmune disorder
  - Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (EDS)
  - Positional Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome (POTS)
  - Epilepsy or other seizure conditions
  - Gastrointestinal disorders
  - Cerebral Palsy
  - Multiple Sclerosis (MS)
  - Rheumatoid Arthritis
  - Paraplegia or quadriplegia
  - Prefer not to say

6. How old are your children now?
7. How old was your child/ren when School Can't started?
8. What level of school were your child/ren in when School Can't first happened?
9. At what type of school did School Can't happen?
10. Where did School Can't happen?
11. This question is about COVID and shutdowns. Think about the time when schools sent children home to learn online. How did changes to how school was delivered affect your child/ren's School Can't?
12. Does your child/ren identify as...
13. What gender does your child/ren most identify with?
14. What is your child's sexual identity?
15. How does/did your child/ren express School Can't?
16. Thinking about events or activities like sports days and dress-up days (e.g., Book Week parade), are there specific activities that lead to School Can't on certain days?
17. If your child/ren are enrolled in formal schooling, how often has your child/ren been absent from school this year due to School Can't?
18. Do you wish to add anything more about how your child/ren showed their School Can't?
19. Please tell us about any other kinds of School Can't that your child/ren showed.
20. Why does/did your child/ren say that they refused school?
21. Why do you think that your child/ren refuse/d school?
22. Did/do your children experience School Trauma?
23. 23.What does School Trauma look like in your child/ren?
24. How did the school respond to your child/ren's School Can't?
25. Do you want to say anything more about how the school/s handled the situation with your child/ren?
26. Further comments on how the school/s handled the situation with your child/ren.
27. Whether your child/ren's School Can't is still happening or resolved: - What is their current arrangement for getting a school education?
28. Has School Can't affected your living arrangements?
29. How has School Can't affected your financial security?
30. How has School Can't affected your employment or study?
31. Do you think School Can't will have on effect on your child/ren's future study or employment options? OR if they have left school, has School Can't had an effect on their opportunities to work or study?
32. Thinking about the answer you gave above, can you tell us why you chose your response (Yes/No/Unsure) ?

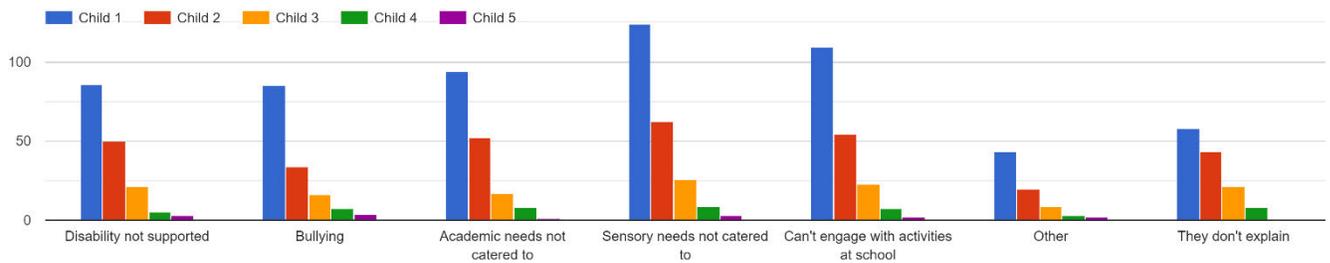
33. What are your children's current employment situation?
34. Please think about the effect of your child/ren's School Can't on you (and your partner if relevant) as parent/s, carer/s, guardian/s, and about the effect on siblings, etc based on the questions in this section.
35. What factors helped to reduce your child/ren's School Can't?
36. While you were trying to resolve your child/ren's School Can't, you may have interacted with teachers, principal, psychologist, occupational therapist (OT) and others. What did not help? Did anything make the School Can't problem worse? What helped? We would like you to think about the impact on home as well as school, and relationships as well as learning.
37. How do you think that supporting Autistic students properly will help the rest of society (communities, workplaces, the Government)?
38. What kind of problems do you think \*not\* helping Autistic students creates for the rest of society (communities, workplaces, the Government)?
39. Is there anything else you would like to add - anything we have missed or that you could not fit into other sections?
40. Do you have a POST- School Can't story? Please share below:
41. Would you be willing to be contacted by TARA to help us better understand your response to this survey?
42. How can we contact you?
43. Your contact details
44. Would you be willing to have any of your responses quoted in the TARA submission?
45. What name would you like attached to any quote from your survey response?
46. Are you Autistic?
47. Do you identify as...
48. What is the main language your family speaks at home?
49. What gender do you most identify with?
50. What is your postcode?

## ► Appendix 2 – Results - Quantitative results (graphs and charts)

This question is about COVID and shutdowns. Think about the time when schools sent children home to learn online. How did changes to how school was delivered affect your child/ren's School Can't?



Why does/did your child/ren say that they refused school?



## ► Appendix 3– School Can't Story – L QLD

For reference:

\* Eldest is 21. Attendance for years 11 and 12 was 36%

\*Middle child is 17. He did not complete year 9 and was unenrolled by the school. Attendance in year 8 was 29%.

\*Youngest is 15. Currently attending year 9 on a new plan begun three weeks ago. Has not

attended for the past two terms. Last year attendance was 32%.

Also note we have attended a total of 6 schools. None of this happened due to lack of trying.

Why school can't?

How about I start at the end.

Three Autistic children, all unable to attend school regularly. All thriving at home and finding their place in the world but school has played, at best, a supporting role in the journey that has been their education.

As a parent I've been programmed to send my children to school regardless of their mental state or feelings on the matter.

As a parent I've had more correspondence with schools than I have with my own mother in the past 13 years.

As a parent I've faced kindness that turns into confusion that turns into a new plan that turns into disappointment that turns into a new plan that turns into anger that turns into giving up entirely and threatening Court time. With each child.

My children have faced all of that plus the added layer of social angst that comes with irregular appearances in friendship groups.

So, where did it begin?

For each of mine the story starts in much the same way. Year 4 is crunch time.

Expectations rise, there have been enough tests and assignments done for the school to notice these kids are smart.

They've been placed in a classroom filled with high achievers, leading a perfectionist 10 year old away from a 'school is a fun learning environment' mentality and right into 'school is a competition' mode.

Other kids are old enough now to notice differences and while most are unfazed, there is that one group who take pleasure in targeting those who don't quite fit in.

The rules have changed. Freedoms restricted. From toilet breaks to sport there is much more rigidity in when and how they are performed and getting it wrong encourages a meeting with parents or a detention or a frowning face on a board.

Class awards given out weekly to single out those who are following the rule book appropriately while silently letting my kids know they need to do better. It's been years of this but they suddenly notice they rarely get one and when they do, it's for compliance, not achievement or disposition.

Still at an age where Teachers and Parents and most other adults are calling all of the shots and disappointing any of them brings a strong sense of failure.

Finding all of this overwhelming and at times terrifying, anxiety begins to creep in. They begin to tense up when a teacher calls on them in class. They stop sticking their hand up. Sometimes they can't sit the test or hand in the assignment because they are so worried it will be wrong. It's that feeling you get as an adult when a police car pulls up beside you. Knowing you did nothing wrong but still your stomach flips. What if? Is there a rule I don't know about? Did I do something wrong?

Not too long after that begins, regular attendance at school ends.

As a parent I begin to get frustrated at my child for not doing something that seems so simple. Turn up. This frustration (and I'm ashamed to admit it, occasionally anger) only adds to the anxiety around school and we now find ourselves stuck in school can't mode.

There have been many, many, many meetings and plans and revised plans and plenty of months where we've been completely ignored. Not much has helped.

I could continue the story for pages more, each child different but at their core in relation to school, the same.

Instead, I'll mention here the things that have worked. Some well, some with positive possibilities.

Firstly, a plan only works if the child has made it. Not the school. Not the parents. The times we have been observers and they have written the plan, have worked.

Lower expectations. This goes for all kids. Education should not be tied to success in Primary School. It should only be tied to learning. I'd recommend removing grades altogether and changing to a system that encourages comprehension of new ideas rather than the competitive scale that currently exists.

For high school, tests, exams and assignments are required but more flexibility in how they are delivered has worked for my eldest and youngest in particular. In a quiet room with no distractions. Or given longer times to finish. Encourage them to hand in what they've done rather than finished work if they've only made it part way through. Assignments with less autonomy and more assistance along the way.

Relax the rules. When my children have been given the freedom to leave a classroom that's too loud, go to the toilet whenever they need to and leave school via a parent if something goes wrong mentally and they can't bounce back from it, they've been much more likely to try again the next day.

If a child develops anxiety, depression, or is facing a major stress event (parental divorce or death, COVID or other global event or other trauma) give them the option to work from home on a reduced or modified workload until they have begun responding to treatment. We do this for adults in the form of stress leave, supporting our youth to do the same is good practice and safer for the child in the longer term.

Recently with my youngest we have begun weekly check ins with the school Counsellor. I cannot stress enough how beneficial they have been. Fifteen minutes. Once a week. Gives my child the freedom to express any worries or concerns and the school can respond appropriately BEFORE it becomes an obstacle.

Finally, deal with bullying more appropriately. In my experience, the bullied child is given resilience programs with a counsellor while the bully is given a day off. This tells the victim that

they are in the wrong, not the bully. Switch it up. Put the bully into counselling and give the victim time off to recover.

There are many more points to make on School Can't but there are others who I'm sure will highlight those areas. For me, and us, those were the areas that mattered most.

Today, my eldest is about to embark on their final year of University, my middle child is still figuring out what comes next and my youngest is back at school on a plan they designed.

School has been complicated but thankfully the lack of attendance has not adversely impacted where they are today, nor their future goals. We are the lucky ones.

Thankyou for reading our story.

## ► Appendix 4– School Can't Story – K

Starting school is a rite of passage for children and their families. Not only do kids go to school to learn how to read and write but an important part is also about socialising and making friends. Some friendships will be short lived whilst other last a lifetime.

Parents imagine Easter Hat Parades, Cake stalls, carnivals, excursions, endless birthday parties and sleepovers. Many parents make friends of their own with Barbecues and family camping trips planned on the family calendar.

I too had this dream for my family but sadly our story goes down a very different path.

### Eldest Child – AKA #1 Commenced Kindergarten

I remember the first day of school for my eldest (#1) as clearly as it was yesterday. They had been informing me since Christmas of all the things they would learn and were so excited they could barely contain themselves.

They ran into their class without a wave or a backward glance, while I was left silently crying in the rain.

#1 was born ready to go to school. At the age of 3 Day Care informed me that she could read and should learn languages. At 4 they had done all they could, and she needed to go to school. She is an old soul, compassionate and wise and a champion of human rights. She had been blessed with a natural love of learning that hopefully her educational experiences will never diminish.

She was fortunate that in kindergarten she was placed in a class with “that teacher”. The teacher that was born to teach. The one every parent wished their child could be in her class. Children thrived in

her classroom. Whilst my kids have been lucky to have some great teachers over the years no one has ever come close to Miss S.

Fast forward 6 months later and Miss S had to take extended leave and the wheels fell off.

Relationships with other children her age were challenging as she was just that little bit different. She did not conform to the rules of little girls and their hierarchy. She wasn't interested in their games.



*“I learn more at home by myself, researching fascinating things. I get to go down the Rabbit Hole and each twist and turn leads me to wanting to know more. At school kids muck up, they are noisy, they don't respect the teacher. I am reading a book in year 10 that I read in year 6”*

The mask that she wore to try and fit in disappeared the more she found her Autistic self.

Many days were spent crying in the classroom combined with situational mutism. She was told to be more resilient. I was told to be harsher. The school suggested we seek out a psychologist to assist with school can't. They spoke about her as if she wasn't in the room and indicated it was all for attention.

The Psychologist's answer was a chart where she could be rewarded with a Freddo Frog if she walked into school alone. And after forking out \$300 my child and I walked out more confused and alone than when we walked in.

Kids that experience real 'school can't' are traumatised. They are not manipulating their parents. They lack guile, they aren't trying to be difficult. In some cases, they are literally in the fight of their life.

It is a mental health crisis and one that can destroy children and their families

Over the course of her education (she commences year 11 2023) she has attended three schools. Public from Kindy – Year 4. Small Independent school year 5-8 and Community based school from year 9 to current that helped to restore her soul but only offers basic education.

The once aspiring Linguistic Anthropologist who has been awarded academic awards most of her schooling years does not see the point of formalised education anymore.

School refusal began in kindy, and we are still exploring how year 11 and 12 will look. We are open to all education models as long as they cater to her emotional and academic needs. The system needs to change and not just because COVID showed us that it can be done. It needs to be changed to avoid a lost generation. The kids who want to go to school, who want to learn but for a myriad of reasons cannot.

We need an education model that supports alternative models, enriches learning. A model that doesn't tell Autistic kids that there is something wrong with them.

A system that at 6 doesn't tell them to suck it up and be more resilient. A system that feeds their souls and enriches their minds.

#### *Youngest Child – AKA #2 Commenced Kindergarten Public school*

- *To sum up child #2 school can't : Destroyed him*

Day-care did not raise any red flags that school would be a major issue for my youngest. Things that were challenging for him were discussed with the Director and solutions quickly found. Drop off was a nightmare until we realised that it wasn't Daycare that was the issue it was being dropped off when there were already a lot of kids there. Too noisy and too overwhelming.

I developed a beautiful relationship with the teachers (with whom I still keep in contact today) because we communicated and worked as a team to ensure that my child felt safe and happy when away from me.

My son is a force of nature. He is charismatic, charming and hilariously funny. Today at 14 he is depressed, anxious, hypervigilant and desperately lonely. Everyday I am terrified he is the child I will lose. Lately it feels like I already have.

He absconded on day two of kindergarten. The school's solution after ongoing lockdowns due to him trying to escape to go home was to ban me from the school. I had to drop him off at the gate and was only allowed to come in after the bell went to get him. Unlike the other parents who forged connections and found friendships I was a sole figure isolated and alone.

Whilst my eldest had the dream teacher for kindy my youngest had the yeller. A fact I had mentioned in numerous meetings with the school would trigger him. By mid-year my 6-year-old was suspended.

Academically my kids are on a par but my youngest was never given the opportunity for enrichment or extension until the librarian saw past his behaviour and placed him in her passion project where he thrived.

He wasn't suspended again. Their solution was exclusion and isolation with either myself not been allowed to attend school events or him having to sit outside the principal's office at a desk so every child, parent and teacher who passed by got to see the 'naughty boy'.

We moved to a regional area for year 3 (year 5 for my eldest) as we felt acreage with plenty of room to run around and a smaller private school would suit our children better.

On the 2 hour drive to the interview for the new school my child that could speak under wet cement had not uttered a word and had bitten holes through his t-shirt. We were so nervous. This was the school we had researched thoroughly and was chosen as it was a small religious school that promoted acceptance and community, exactly what we were looking for.

After spending an hour on a school tour the Principal asked my youngest if he liked the school and if so why? His response was there no noisy bells, it's quiet here. No-one knew that the bells were a trigger because no educator had ever asked him.

The year passed peacefully with a few hiccups but nothing disastrous. I could finally let out that breath I had been holding in, I volunteered at a couple of things and I began to feel that our family would be part of the school community

Then the Principal changed and year 4 saw #2 placed in a class with another yeller of a teacher who believed children should be seen and not heard. They advised me they were a special education teacher and therefore did not need to read the "All about me" documents I had carefully compiled over the years. Exclusion and suspensions followed for the next couple of years. But still my child begged to go to school.

He loved school so much that when it closed for covid he begged to attend. Smaller, quieter classes with less rote learning saw him thrive. Crisis home based schooling through online classrooms had been a non-event.

I had thought it would be a teacher teaching like they did in the classroom just on Zoom. But in reality, it was print this, tick this and a teacher supervising chat on google classroom

Finally the time had come to go High School but limited opportunities were provided for my child to transition even though I had multiple meetings before #2 started. I was reassured that they had the training and the staff to support my child. High School is a major change for any child but for an Autistic child with co-occurring conditions exacerbated by Anxiety it was traumatising.

Unlike his peers he was only permitted partial enrolment. I disagreed with this decision as I had multiple meetings with the school informing them that he needed to feel connected with the school and that again he would be an 'outsider' in those first days when connections are made. He also couldn't understand why he wasn't allowed to attend full time like the other kids. However, we were not given a choice.

He didn't understand the rules, the jokes, body language and the constant change of classes and teachers increased his anxiety. Then the bullying began and the inevitable segregations and suspensions.

With regular school attendance his social and emotional skills were stunted. Intellectually he was 18, physically 16, developmentally 6-7. By constantly removing him he was unable to develop these skills and develop friendships with peers and relationships with teachers. .

After serving multiple suspensions instead of returning him to school full they permitted him to attend for 90 minutes a day where he was to learn in the library supervised by a Teacher's Aide.

This was not only confused and further isolated #2 it was also an unbearable hardship emotionally and financially for our family. I could no longer work full time. I would work when I could (often through the night) and whilst waiting outside the school for the 90 minutes he was allowed to learn.

This went on for a period of 7 weeks with no plan forthcoming as to when he would return to the classroom. His mental health deteriorated and I informed the school he would not be returning until they had formulated a plan to support, protect and educate him.

The school's reply was to send him to a \_\_\_\_\_ for 6-12 months. A place that does not receive individual funding and resembled a jail. A place that might be suitable for transit students it is not a place that offers long term support for children with a disability or children suffering trauma who need and would benefit from a trauma informed alternative education model.

*In submission 345 February 2017 Inquiry into Students with a disability or special needs in NSW, the Teachers Federation called for equitable access to resources for students with a disability or special needs in regional and metropolitan areas.*

*And stated "The timely release of additional funds is critical to the educational success of students in classrooms in 2017, in particular those engaging in short term intensive programs such as those offered at the STC.*

*Staffing levels need to reflect the significant additional learning needs of our students, who typically present with a history of long periods of non-attendance and disengagement in mainstream education, resulting in gaps in their learning continuum and the need for high-level support in areas of wellbeing and social capacity.*

*It is the lived experience of teachers in this setting that, with smaller class settings, individualised learning, and social support, students are able to develop the self-confidence and self-efficacy to be successful learners when they return to their home school"*

Shortly after the suspensions began again for minor and confusing transactions that were not equitable and did not allow for his disability or follow procedural fairness.

Then covid lockdowns began and the school closed down completely (16/8) unlike #1 school there was no provision for #2 to attend school as per the Government and Department provisions for school attendance guidelines. My business was classified as essential, and I am an authorized worker.

The feeder school allowed other children to attend but #2 was told no. Again, he felt rejected.

When covid restrictions were lifted (25/10) #2 returned to school .

There was no warning that his had retired, and as she was the person who gave out the medication not only was #2 not medicated but neither was anyone else.

He came home very distraught and dysregulated He was suspended the next day and then placed on partial enrolment for the rest of the year.

Weeks later the school informed me that #2 had been set up by a particular child and had been targeted and was provoked to get a response. The Head teacher apologised and told me that they couldn't keep my son safe at school and he could just come to a couple of fun ends of year events.

Due to exclusions, suspension, segregation and covid my child attended maybe 2 months of high school in the important foundation year 7.

He was waitlisted for a support class in a mainstream high school however his placement was still not confirmed prior to the xmas school holidays, and a highly anxious child had no idea of where he would be going to school in year 8.

I investigated every option I could find e.g. home schooling, distance Education.

However, despite feeling that no-one wanted him, despite receiving a limited to basic education he still WANTED to go to school.

He commenced year 8 in a support unit in a large mainstream high school. Again, they placed him on partial enrolment. Again, I objected. His first nondirected attendance and then suspension was in March. Over the course of the year, he was kept away from school for 51%.

Due to start year 9 #2 is a very disengaged, depressed child who has school can't.

He has been bounced from pillar to post; he has been humiliated. He now feels there is no place for him. The place that he was so desperate to go to destroyed him.

At 14 this bouncy happy child with a thirst for learning, a deep desire to connect with his peers has given up. He has given up on his dream to join the Navy, has given up on trying to find friends. He has given up on himself.

What he needed was access to an equitable education in a system that not only supported but protected him.

He needed an opportunity to belong and contribute to a school community and all the advantages that provides such as connection, friendship and access to a variety of subjects that is offered to all children under Australian and International Law.

Instead, he has ended up with mental health conditions and a basic education. He was the child you could and now he can't.

*Autistic Parent – The parent child relationship is severely damaged through school trauma*

School can't have caused our family significant financial and emotional stress. In fact, we have endured unjustifiable hardship.

I am no longer a mother who runs a small business and a charity but I have been forced out of necessity to also be a lawyer, a human rights advocator a researcher and a prisoner in my own home or outside the school gates.

During the school term my phone ringing causes anxiety. I cannot even think about attending school in person anymore.

I cannot work full time or typical hours. I pay someone a higher rate than I earn because I have no idea if I will be required to pick up a child that I dropped off ten minutes before or even if they will attend school.

Sunday nights are a time of enormous stress for the whole household as #1's anxiety peaks at the thought of Monday.

My life has become a series of never-ending meetings where each meeting feels like Groundhog Day. Things are promised rarely followed through. When meetings necessitated my husband to also attend, two incomes were lost.

I believe that schools don't provide for anyone who is different and whose anxiety manifests externally. I believe that the Education department has used suspension / exclusion as a default behavioural strategy.

I believe that parents are a great source of information about their child and should be included and involved as much as possible and realistic.

I recommend that all staff top to bottom undergo professional development preferably by an Autistic led organisation as to what Autism is and how to support Autistic students.

Priority is on leadership and teachers in support units. This training should at a minimum also include empathy, connection over compliance, fostering relationships and inclusion (not

integration), executive functioning and how this varies depending on anxiety, sensory processing, interoception and activities to support transitions from playground to the classroom.

