

41ST PARLIAMENT



Education and Health Standing Committee

Report 6

A DIFFERENT KIND OF BRILLIANCE

Report of the inquiry into support for autistic children and young people in schools

Presented by Mr C.J. Tallentire, MLA

March 2024

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Education and Health Standing Committee

A different kind of brilliance

Report of the inquiry into support for autistic children and young people in schools

Report No. 6

Presented by

Mr C.J. Tallentire, MLA

Laid on the Table of the Legislative Assembly on 21 March 2024

Inquiry Terms of Reference

The Education and Health Standing Committee will inquire into support for autistic children and young people in schools.

In particular, the Inquiry will consider:

1. The prevalence of autism in WA and projected demand for support in schools.
2. Current support available for autistic students in WA schools, including consideration of how:
 - a. evidence-based practices are implemented across the school system; and
 - b. school supports are co-ordinated with other service areas to respond to the needs of autistic students and their families.
3. Strategies in other jurisdictions that support school systems to respond to the needs of autistic students, and the applicability of those strategies to WA.

Chair's Foreword

A different kind of brilliance is the report of the third inquiry by the Education and Health Standing Committee in the 41st Parliament. In it, we examine the support for autistic children and young people in our schools.

As Members of Parliament, the members of the Committee came to this topic aware of the significant number of families in our electorates consumed by the challenges of helping their kids cope with the school system and the transition into higher education, training and the workforce. My hope is that the myriad problems and challenges faced by autistic students, like school refusal, bullying and early disengagement from education, can be remedied by the implementation of our recommendations.

During the inquiry the Committee heard from people suggesting we broaden our scope to include all forms of neurodiversity. Our approach has been to maintain focus on autism but recognise the applicability of our findings and recommendations to other forms of neurodiversity. We discuss this further in Chapter 1.

The report acknowledges that the best people to solve the problems being faced by autistic students are autistic people. Our Recommendation 4 proposes the development of a cross-sector WA neurodiversity education strategy 'led and co-designed by autistic and neurodiverse people.'

In Chapter 2 we discuss why there's been an increase in prevalence, which is likely due to a range of factors including increased awareness and incentives to access available funding via the National Disability Insurance Scheme and school systems.

During the inquiry the Committee had the opportunity to see autistic students flourishing. The support these students received from their teachers and education assistants was impressive, made possible because the staff had benefitted from the necessary training and because they were afforded the time needed with individual students. The goal must be to ensure a consistently high standard of support across the whole system. Failure to provide this risks entrenching inequity in our school system and creates uncertainty and stress. Autistic students and their families should be able to feel confident that their needs will be understood and met, no matter which school they attend.

We are mindful of an ongoing national discussion presenting the case for inclusion of all students in mainstream schools as opposed to running specialist non-mainstream schools and support centres for students with different learning styles and abilities. The key to success appears to be meeting the needs of individual students, while maintaining a spirit of inclusivity—built on equity principles—throughout the school.

A special note of thanks to the Committee's Principal Research Officer, Catie Parsons, and Research Officer, Sylvia Wolf, who both made exceptional contributions to the quality of the inquiry. I also thank Maddison Evans for her contribution.

I am very appreciative of the work of my fellow Committee members, Deputy Chair Lisa Baker MLA, Ms Caitlin Collins MLA and Mr Kevin Michel MLA. I would especially like to acknowledge my colleague Mrs Lisa Munday MLA who not only brought her professional perspective but also gave insights from her family's experience.

The recommendations in *A different kind of brilliance* can guide necessary changes in our school system and will give everyone a chance to appreciate the practical benefits and the equity of a neurodiversity-affirming education system.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris Tallett". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "C".

MR C.J. TALLENTIRE, MLA
CHAIR

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Executive Summary

Understanding of autism and its impact on functioning has evolved significantly in recent years to shift focus away from deficits towards strengths. Autistic people have many strengths and capabilities which can contribute to their high performance in areas such as technology, mathematics and creative or artistic pursuits. Yet despite these strengths, autistic people experience worse educational outcomes than the general population and other disability cohorts. These outcomes represent a significant loss of potential and continue to negatively impact autistic people throughout their lives.

An increasing number of autistic students are disengaged from education or being homeschooled because of unsuccessful and harmful experiences at school. This has a negative financial, social and emotional impact on their families. Schools are also overwhelmed and struggling to support autistic students. Contributing factors to this include the increasing prevalence of autism diagnoses and imputed disability, and a disconnect between practices in schools and advances in autism research and understanding.

We have a responsibility to address the educational inequity and poor outcomes experienced by autistic people, and failing to act will come at significant personal, social and economic cost. This report addresses the critical need to address barriers to inclusion and promote enablers of evidence-based practice to support autistic students at school.

Autism diagnosis and demand for support in schools is increasing

Prevalence of autism diagnosis is increasing in Western Australia, in line with national and global trends. Autism is the largest primary disability group of people accessing the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), and the largest group of students eligible for an Individual Disability Allocation (IDA) from the Department of Education. Autism diagnosis can vary according to demographic factors, such as gender, age, race, socio-economic status and location. Certain autism profiles are also less recognised than others. Because of the barriers faced by these groups in obtaining an autism diagnosis, it is not always the most appropriate basis for determining whether an individual requires support.

Various key factors are affecting the prevalence of autism, including the expansion of diagnostic boundaries, greater awareness and system factors that incentivise diagnosis—in particular, diagnosis unlocks the availability of support through the NDIS and the education system.

In the context of increasing prevalence, system changes are needed to ensure autistic students receive the support they need to have positive experiences and outcomes at school. An epidemiological study on the prevalence of autism in young children in Western Australia is required to better understand and prepare for the current and future needs of autistic students at school.

Evidence-based practice for supporting autistic students at school is fragmented and inconsistent

Evidence-based practices for supporting autistic children have been defined in National Guidelines. Supports should be neurodiversity-affirming and incorporate the lived experiences and preferences of autistic children and their families. Some autistic students are well-supported at school, where staff recognise and respond well to their needs and communicate and engage well with families and therapists. Supportive schools are inclusive and offer flexibility to accommodate the needs of autistic students. Specialist support and programs are having positive impacts for students who are struggling. Success for autistic students at school is often attributable to support provided by individual leaders and staff with specific values, knowledge or lived experience of autism.

However, some schools or staff are more inclusive or supportive than others, which creates inequity and unnecessary challenges for students, families and schools. Similarly to other jurisdictions, Western Australia needs a cohesive neurodiversity education strategy to address the challenges that autistic students, families and educators currently experience and embed evidence-based practice and supports across the education system. Development of this strategy should be led by autistic and neurodiverse individuals. It should also include measurable performance indicators and a commitment to undertake further research on and evaluation of evidence-based practices in schools.

Inadequate support for autistic students at school is often the function of a lack of understanding and training

Limited understanding of autism impacts the ability of schools to make appropriate individual adjustments for autistic students. In addition to failing to meet students' educational needs, this can also result in the use of inappropriate and harmful practices.

Coordinated, system-wide training is needed to develop both theoretical knowledge of autism and practical skills to implement evidence-based practices and supports. This includes mandatory content at university to better prepare graduate teachers, and targeted support for early career teachers. Support staff, such as education assistants and Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers, would benefit from increased access to relevant training. Scholarship funding should be made available to teachers to build workforce capability and increase access to expertise in supporting autistic students. School leaders also need targeted, ongoing professional learning and should be required to demonstrate competence in inclusive education when seeking appointment.

Inclusive school culture is paramount to effectively supporting autistic students

Autistic students are often disadvantaged and excluded from educational opportunities. More work must happen to build school cultures that genuinely include autistic students. Professional collaboration is key to building school-wide competency and embedding evidence-based practices. Tools and resources should be developed to allow schools and leaders to comprehensively assess the inclusivity of their school culture for autistic students. Specialist Learning Programs only meet some of the demand for educational settings for

autistic students with strong academic capacity but high-level behavioural needs. Transition supports should be strengthened, particularly for students moving into secondary school. Autistic students benefit from flexible arrangements and schools need stronger guidance on their authority to approve these. There should also be greater focus at school and system level on promoting positive autistic identity and celebrating inclusion and diversity, to increase understanding of autism and reduce stigma.

Current resourcing levels limit the ability of schools to implement evidence-based practice and adequate supports

School and system-level resourcing to support autistic students has not kept pace with increasing prevalence and complexity of needs. Inadequate resourcing means that schools are forced to make sacrifices to practices that support autistic students, or students and families are forced towards specialist settings that have greater resources but may not be their preference. School infrastructure does not always suit the needs of autistic students. Limited resourcing in regional areas disadvantages autistic students living outside of the metropolitan region. Teachers have insufficient time to plan and make adjustments, build relationships and communicate with families and therapists. Demand for specialist programs and support outstrips current resourcing.

There has been some recent investment in system-level behaviour support coordinators, who will help schools develop multi-tiered systems of support for the engagement, wellbeing and achievement of students with disability. However, the basis for supplementary school-level funding needs review:

- The Individual Disability Allocation is only available for students with an autism diagnosis, which creates barriers to access. The Department of Education is shifting towards a needs-based funding model. This must be progressed as a matter of urgency, and implemented with appropriate resources and training support for schools.
- The Educational Adjustment Allocation has also been expanded. Although this is intended to support the additional learning needs of students who may not have a formal diagnosis or be eligible for IDA, it is allocated according to the proportion of students in the lowest 15 per cent of NAPLAN results. This is not necessarily a relevant or accurate measure of undiagnosed student disability. It would be more appropriate to align the allocation of this funding with the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability, as recommended by the Disability Royal Commission.

There is ongoing concern over accountability and transparency around how school funding for students with disability is used to benefit the student or cohort of students it is intended for. This can be overcome through better communication and public reporting.

Families are concerned about transparency and accountability

Some policies and practices used in schools have not kept up with advances in autism and neurodiversity research and understanding. These discriminate against and cause harm to autistic students. The Department of Education's application of Applied Behaviour Analysis in relation to autistic students should be independently reviewed and evaluated.

At system-level, it is encouraging that the Department of Education recently revised its *Student behaviour in public schools* policy and procedures to better reflect good inclusive practice in schools and current understandings of disability. It has also strengthened its stakeholder consultation processes to ensure the views of people with disability receive proper understanding and consideration. However, the Department should expand its range of publicly available information and resources on evidence-based practices to support autistic students at school, and promote this so that families and schools can access the same information. Educational equity data sets should also be collected and published as an accountability measure.

There are persistent difficulties with communication and collaboration between families and schools. Specialist consultants should be more available to engage directly with students and families regarding supports at school.

A coordinated, cross-sector approach will improve outcomes for autistic students at school and beyond

The limited interaction between schools and the education system with other support services creates stress for autistic students and their families. Schools struggle to coordinate supports with therapy providers, and high-level collaboration is needed across sectors to better connect NDIS supports with education systems.

There is also scope to strengthen connections between the education system and post-school providers such as universities, training organisations and employers to improve outcomes for autistic students as they transition to post-school life.

Other jurisdictions have developed or are developing whole-of-government autism strategies to coordinate the functions of government and organisations to support the needs of autistic people across the lifespan. Western Australia should adopt a similar focus and develop a whole-of-government neurodiversity strategy, led and co-designed by autistic and neurodiverse people.

Ministerial Response

In accordance with Standing Order 277(1) of the Standing Orders of the Legislative Assembly, the Education and Health Standing Committee directs that the Premier and the Minister for Education report to the Assembly as to the action, if any, proposed to be taken by the Government with respect to the recommendations of the Committee.

Findings and Recommendations

Chapter 2 – The prevalence of autism in WA and projected demand for support in schools

Finding 1	Page 12
The prevalence of autism diagnosis in WA is increasing, which is consistent with Australian and global trends.	

Finding 2	Page 15
Some individuals who fit the criteria for an autism diagnosis will experience delays or not obtain a diagnosis, because of barriers to accessing diagnostic services.	

Finding 3	Page 15
Barriers to obtaining a diagnosis are more profound across certain demographics than others.	

Finding 4	Page 16
Because of the barriers some groups face in obtaining an autism diagnosis, it is not always the most appropriate basis for determining whether an individual requires support.	

Recommendation 1	Page 21
That the Premier provide funding for a comprehensive epidemiological study into the prevalence of autism or autism likelihood in young children in Western Australia.	

Recommendation 2	Page 21
That the Minister for Education direct the Department of Education to use trend data from within and outside Australia to predict and prepare for the current and future needs of autistic children within the WA school system.	

Chapter 3 – Evidence-based practice for supporting autistic students at school

Finding 5	Page 25
National Guidelines have defined evidence-based practice for supporting autistic children, which includes that supports should be neurodiversity-affirming and reflect the lived experience and preferences of autistic children and their families.	

Recommendation 3	Page 25
That the Minister for Education ensure that all relevant legislative and policy frameworks align with the <i>National Guideline for supporting the learning, participation and wellbeing of autistic children and their families in Australia</i> .	

Finding 6**Page 30**

Some autistic students are experiencing success with current supports. This is often attributable to individual school leaders or staff with specific values, knowledge or lived experience of autism.

Finding 7**Page 31**

The implementation of evidence-based practices to support autistic students is highly inconsistent between schools and school systems, and within schools. This creates inequity and unnecessary challenges for students, families and schools.

Finding 8**Page 34**

A neurodiversity education strategy for Western Australia would drive systemic change to improve learning and wellbeing outcomes for autistic students, and others, and improve the capability of schools to support a broad range of students.

Recommendation 4**Page 37**

That the Minister for Education support the development of a cross-sector WA neurodiversity education strategy, led and co-designed by autistic and neurodiverse people, that focuses on improving learning and wellbeing outcomes for autistic and neurodiverse students at school.

The strategy should be funded for implementation and include the following elements:

- measurable performance indicators at school and system level
- a commitment to undertake further research on and evaluation of evidence-based practices to support autistic students at school
- periodic review.

Chapter 4 – Understanding of autism and training**Finding 9****Page 41**

Limited understanding of autism is a key driver behind inadequate support for autistic students at school, including failing to recognise autism, ineffective individual education plans and inappropriate and harmful practices.

Recommendation 5**Page 41**

That the Minister for Education strengthen training and resources available for teachers and school leaders in relation to developing effective Individual Education Plans.

Finding 10**Page 43**

Graduate teachers in Western Australia are not well prepared to support autistic students at school because university course content on autism and inclusive education is inadequate and not mandatory.

Recommendation 6**Page 43**

That the Minister for Education continue to work with Western Australian universities to change their core content to include a mandatory component on inclusive education and supporting autistic students, and that universities be required to report on their progress at six-monthly intervals.

Recommendation 7**Page 43**

That the Minister for Education ensures that additional support, in the form of professional learning content and in-class modelling and coaching, is targeted towards early career teachers in relation to supporting autistic students.

Finding 11**Page 44**

A lack of suitably qualified education assistants, and an increase in the number of students requiring support, means that education assistants are often being required to work beyond their training and experience.

Finding 12**Page 45**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and support staff would benefit from further professional learning in relation to neurodiversity, to enhance the key role they play in connecting schools with Aboriginal families and communities.

Recommendation 8**Page 45**

That the Minister for Education ensure that funding is available for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to undertake dedicated, culturally safe professional learning in relation to supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander autistic students, particularly in regional areas.

Recommendation 9**Page 46**

That the Minister for Education ensure that scholarship funding is made available for teachers to undertake postgraduate study in autism and inclusive education, to build workforce capability and increase access to expertise in supporting autistic students.

Finding 13**Page 47**

School leaders are vital to building inclusive school cultures but they often lack the requisite knowledge and training.

Finding 14**Page 48**

The Department of Education has identified that school leaders need further support to effectively build inclusive school cultures.

Recommendation 10**Page 48**

That the Minister for Education ensures that competence and completion of training in inclusive education is incorporated into the selection requirements for applicants seeking appointment as a school principal.

Recommendation 11 **Page 48**

That the Minister for Education ensures that a program of ongoing professional learning in relation to evidence-based practices to support autistic students is available and targeted towards school principals.

Finding 15 **Page 49**

School staff need both theoretical knowledge and practical training in order to effectively implement evidence-based practices to support autistic students.

Recommendation 12 **Page 49**

That the Minister for Education invest in professional learning programs for educators that build both sound theoretical knowledge of evidence-based practices to support autistic students, as well as practical skills in implementing these practices.

Chapter 5 – Building a culture of inclusion

Finding 16 **Page 54**

A whole-school approach is key to building inclusive school culture and embedding evidence-based practice to support autistic students.

Finding 17 **Page 56**

Western Australian public schools and principals are not specifically prompted to evaluate inclusivity as part of any formal review processes.

Recommendation 13 **Page 56**

That the Minister for Education ensure that tools and resources are developed and made available to school leaders and schools to comprehensively assess the inclusivity of their school culture for autistic students.

Finding 18 **Page 58**

Specialist Learning Programs only meet some of the demand for educational settings for autistic students with strong academic capacity but high-level behavioural needs.

Finding 19 **Page 59**

There is further scope to strengthen transition supports for autistic students into secondary school through case management, planning and advice, particularly in relation to students with complex needs.

Finding 20 **Page 61**

Flexible arrangements for autistic students can allow them to remain engaged in education. However, many schools are unwilling to consider these arrangements, or are unclear on the extent of their authority to approve them.

Recommendation 14**Page 61**

That the Minister for Education provide clarification and guidance for schools on their authority to approve flexible attendance and subject loads for autistic students who require it.

Finding 21**Page 62**

Promoting and celebrating autism inclusion and diversity in school communities is an important factor in driving cultural change, increasing understanding of autism and reducing stigma.

Recommendation 15**Page 62**

That the Minister for Education ensures that the Department of Education develops further ways to promote the benefits of inclusion and encourage school communities to celebrate diversity.

Chapter 6 – School resourcing and funding**Finding 22****Page 68**

Resourcing to support autistic students, both at school and system level, has not kept pace with increasing prevalence and complexity of needs.

Finding 23**Page 68**

Inadequate resourcing limits the ability of schools to implement evidence-based practices to support autistic students.

Finding 24**Page 68**

The Department of Education is funding new FTE to help schools build multi-tiered systems of support for the engagement, wellbeing and achievement of students with disability.

Finding 25**Page 70**

The Department of Education's current diagnosis-based model for Individual Disability Allocation funding creates barriers to access.

Finding 26**Page 71**

The Department of Education is progressing a shift towards a needs-based model of individual disability funding, although diagnosis may remain as an element of eligibility or allocation.

Recommendation 16**Page 72**

That the Minister for Education ensures that the functional needs assessment tool being developed by the Department of Education is:

- aligned with the Autism CRC’s framework for assessing, differentiating and reporting children’s functional strengths and support needs
- implemented with appropriate resources and training support, and
- progressed as a matter of urgency.

Recommendation 17**Page 75**

That the Minister for Education progress Recommendation 7.12 (c) of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, regarding adopting a strengths- and needs- based disability funding model that aligns with the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability.

Recommendation 18**Page 77**

That the Minister for Education progress Recommendation 7.12 (d) and (e) of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, regarding improving transparency on use of disability funding.

Chapter 7 – Transparency and accountability**Finding 27****Page 81**

Some practices and approaches used in WA schools do not align with current research and understanding about autism and neurodiversity, and discriminate against and cause harm to autistic students. These include approaches to school-wide behaviour management, as well as some targeted interventions for autistic students.

Recommendation 19**Page 81**

That the Minister for Education direct that the Department of Education’s application of Applied Behaviour Analysis in relation to autistic students be independently reviewed and evaluated.

Finding 28**Page 83**

The Department of Education’s recent revision of the *Student behaviour in public schools* policy and procedures better reflects current understandings of disability.

Finding 29**Page 84**

The Department of Education recently established two disability and inclusion committees to strengthen its stakeholder consultation processes and the voice of people with disability.

Finding 30 **Page 86**

Despite strong legislative and policy requirements for schools to consult and communicate with families regarding support for autistic students, widespread difficulties with this persist.

Finding 31 **Page 87**

The service model for specialist support from the School of Special Educational Needs: Disability (SSEN:D) does not support direct communication and consultation with families.

Recommendation 20 **Page 87**

That the Minister for Education review the service model and resourcing for the School of Special Educational Needs: Disability (SSEN:D) to ensure that consultant teachers are available to engage directly with students and families.

Finding 32 **Page 88**

The Department of Education publishes very little information or resources about evidence-based practices to support autistic children at school. There is no information about supporting autistic students in mainstream settings.

Recommendation 21 **Page 88**

That the Minister for Education ensures that the Department of Education significantly expands its range of publicly available information and resources on evidence-based practices to support autistic students at school, and promotes its availability so that families and schools can access the same information.

Finding 33 **Page 89**

Families are unsure of complaints pathways regarding support for their autistic child at school, and have very limited avenues for independent review.

Finding 34 **Page 90**

Data collection, analysis and publication on educational equity and outcomes for students with disability is an important measure of accountability.

Recommendation 22 **Page 90**

That the Minister for Education commit to collecting and publicly reporting educational equity data sets, disaggregated for students with disability and other equity cohorts.

Chapter 8 – Coordinating supports at school and beyond

Finding 35 **Page 93**

Various barriers make it difficult for schools and therapists to work productively together to support autistic students, including practical and administrative challenges and difficulty aligning educational and therapy approaches and goals.

Finding 36**Page 96**

There is scope to strengthen connections between the education system and post-school providers to improve outcomes for autistic students transitioning to post-school life.

Finding 37**Page 98**

Services that support autistic people across the lifespan are fragmented, and better coordination will be key to improving life outcomes for autistic people.

Recommendation 23**Page 98**

That the Premier support the development of a whole-of-government neurodiversity strategy, led and co-designed by autistic and neurodiverse people, that focuses on improving life outcomes for autistic and neurodiverse Western Australians.

Chapter 1

The inquiry into support for autistic children and young people in schools

- 1.1 In March 2023, the Committee invited two eminent autism researchers, Professor Andrew Whitehouse of the Telethon Kids Institute and Professor Sonya Girdler of the Curtin Autism Research Group, to give evidence on successes and challenges in translating autism research into practice, particularly in schools. Their evidence influenced the Committee’s decision to undertake this inquiry and was reflected in the many submissions we received from the autistic and autism communities.

Autistic people have strengths

- 1.2 Professor Girdler told the Committee about the neurodiversity movement, championed by Australian sociologist Judy Singer, which celebrates that people’s brains work in unique ways:

This perspective and this paradigm creates a tension with the medical model because neurodiversity assumes that what is natural is always beneficial, which is at odds with the purpose of clinical research, which seeks to alleviate suffering and cure a condition. Judy Singer wanted to give real credit to the diverse bodies and minds of autistic individuals and remind us to look at how their ways of thinking actually may be in some ways beneficial and important to understand. It talks about embracing autistic identity as part of who you are and part of your personality.¹

- 1.3 Professor Girdler said that academic understanding of autism and its impact on functioning had evolved significantly during the last decade to shift focus away from deficits towards strengths. The ability of individuals to function in the world is looked at holistically, and a holistic view of functioning. An example of this is the World Health Organisation’s International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), which recognises the role of contextual (environmental and personal) factors in the creation of disability. Professor Girdler explained:

So I really think that this model is incredibly elegant in reminding us that the focus on body structures and functioning in autism and other health conditions, in my opinion, tends to become a blame game—we target the person as the level of intervention; the person at the level of impairment—and we are always trying to fix the person. I think in disability, it is extremely important to look at what in the environment we need to do, what personal factors you need to consider and what

1 Professor Sonya Girdler, Curtin University, *Transcript of Evidence*, 29 March 2023 p. 3.

are things in the occupational areas of a person's life, like education, you really need to consider as well.²

- 1.4 Professor Girdler said that the ICF reminds us that autistic individuals have many strengths and capabilities, including attention to detail, a strong sense of morality, a preference to work on repeated and monotonous tasks, visual perception, intellectual functions and trustworthiness.³ Research has found that, collectively, these attributes contribute to the high performance of autistic individuals in areas such as technology, mathematics and creative or artistic pursuits.⁴ In this way, we understand that when differences are embraced as strengths, autistic people can show a different kind of brilliance.

***Neurodiversity is as important
to our future as biodiversity.
We need to do better.***

- Submission 23, name withheld

School supports are critical to improving outcomes for autistic people

- 1.5 Despite having strengths, autistic people experience worse educational outcomes than the general population and other disability cohorts. For example:
- 32 per cent of autistic students do not make it past Year 10 (compared to 24.9 per cent of all people with a disability and 15.4 per cent of people without a disability)⁵
 - 75 per cent of autistic students do not complete education beyond year 12⁶
 - 77.7 per cent of autistic students experience difficulty at their place of learning, including fitting in socially, learning difficulties and communication difficulties.⁷
- 1.6 Poor educational outcomes continue to impact autistic people throughout their lives, resulting in reduced opportunities for further education, employment and independent living. Social exclusion, poor mental health and significantly reduced life expectancy are also results of the cumulative impact of autistic people's negative life experiences.⁸ This

2 Professor Sonya Girdler, Curtin University, *Transcript of Evidence*, 29 March 2023 p. 3.

3 *ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

4 Elinda Ai Lim Lee et al., "He Sees his Autism as a Strength, Not a Deficit Now": A Repeated Cross-Sectional Study Investigating the Impact of Strengths-Based Programs on Autistic Adolescents', *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 2023.

5 Submission 38, Amaze, p. 2.

6 Senate Select Committee on Autism, *Services, support and life outcomes for autistic Australians*, March 2022, p. 21.

7 Submission 39, Kiind, p. 6.

8 Senate Select Committee on Autism, *Services, support and life outcomes for autistic Australians*, March 2022, p. 21; Professor Sonya Girdler, Curtin University, *Transcript of Evidence*, 29 March 2023 p. 4.

represents an enormous and entirely preventable loss of potential. Positive educational experiences are vital to giving autistic people the best opportunities to succeed later in life.

The loss is of course greatest for the children and families, but as a society we are also losing the amazing talents, skills and charms that neurodiversity brings. Our kids often have a different way of seeing things, but that brings unique problem-solving skills, valuable attention to detail and an incredible ability to remain highly focused. Rather than harnessing these skills, many of these kids will become adults depending on their families and the NDIS for the rest of their lives, unless things change.

- Dr Emily Pearce, *Further Autistic Children's Education and Schooling (FACES)*

Autistic students are disengaged from education, with harmful impacts for them and their families

- 1.7 Professor Whitehouse told the Committee that the challenges autistic students and their families face at school are at 'emergency levels':

I think that this is a major, major issue for the state, and we need to take very clear, urgent action before we lose more kids to mental health challenges, suicide and post-traumatic stress disorder through the way that our education system is handling neurodiversity at the moment.⁹

- 1.8 The harm experienced by autistic students at school can manifest in various ways—most commonly social exclusion, sensory overload and behavioural meltdowns, which often results in the use of exclusionary discipline. These experiences can leave deep scars—poor mental health, autistic burnout, school anxiety, chronic absenteeism and school refusal and, in some cases, PTSD and suicide.¹⁰

- 1.9 Evidence to this inquiry, and others, reflects that an increasing number of autistic students are disengaged from education or being homeschooled because of unsuccessful and harmful experiences at school.¹¹ Parents reported that they needed to reduce or quit their paid employment in these situations or when their child was experiencing difficulties at school, due to regular interruptions to their work day for meetings and appointments, dealing with incidents, suspensions or absenteeism.¹² The negative financial and social impacts of this

9 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 March 2023, p. 4.

10 Submission 23, Name withheld, p. 2; Submission 39, Kiind, p. 3.

11 Submission 78, Autism Association of Western Australia, p. 1; Senate Education and Employment References Committee, *The national trend of school refusal and related matters*, August 2023, pp. 3, 25; Senate Select Committee on Autism, *Services, support and life outcomes for autistic Australians*, March 2022, p. 206.

12 Submission 8, Name withheld, p. 2; Submission 17, Name withheld, p. 1; Submission 21, Tanya Princi, p. 2; Submission 23, Name withheld, p. 1; Submission 52, Name withheld, p. 1; Submission 57, Name withheld, p. 2; Submission 63, Western Australian Council of State School Organisations, p. 7; Submission 68, Name withheld, p. 1; Submission 72, Name withheld, p. 3; Submission 81, Name withheld, p. 2; Submission 90, Name withheld, p. 6.

extend to parents and siblings, and disproportionately effect primary caregivers, who are usually women.¹³ It is worth noting that nearly all the parents who made submissions to this inquiry are mothers.

1.10 Parents also reported that they are exhausted by the time, effort and emotional energy spent advocating for supports for their autistic children at school, which comes at a cost to their own mental health and relationships.¹⁴

Often, rather than being supported, they are made to feel as though their parenting is to blame for their child’s behaviour.¹⁵

This need to assign blame undermines relationships in a situation when constructive partnerships are essential. Educating school staff that autistic behaviours are not a consequence of parenting choices would be greatly appreciated by parents.

- Submission 20, a parent (name withheld)

Schools are overwhelmed and struggling to support autistic students

1.11 Professor Girdler told us that supporting autistic individuals during their school years is critical in improving outcomes for autistic people, but schools are also struggling.¹⁶ This report explores the factors contributing to this, which include:

- the increasing prevalence of autism diagnoses and imputed disability, which has left schools overwhelmed and unprepared for the numbers of students requiring support¹⁷
- there is a disconnect between advances in autism research and practices in schools, which are often outdated and not connected to modern-day understanding of neurodiversity and evidence-based practice.¹⁸

13 Submission 39, Kiind, p. 3; Submission 68, Name withheld, p. 2.

14 Submission 8, Name withheld, p. 1; Submission 39, Kiind, p. 9; Submission 52, Name withheld, p. 1; Submission 63, Western Australian Council of State School Organisations, pp. 5-7; Submission 81, Name withheld, p. 2; Dr Emily Pearce, Furthering Autistic Children’s Education and Schooling, *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 September 2023 p. 2.

15 Submission 6, Name withheld, p. 1; Submission 14, Name withheld, p. 1; Submission 20, Name withheld, p. 5; Submission 74, Georgina Ker, p. 1; Dr Emily Pearce, Furthering Autistic Children’s Education and Schooling, *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 September 2023 p. 2; Heidi Brandis, PDA Perth WA Parents Support Group, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, p. 4.

16 Professor Sonya Girdler, Curtin University, *Transcript of Evidence*, 29 March 2023 p. 4.

17 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 March 2023, p. 7; Professor Sonya Girdler, Curtin University, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 October 2023, pp. 2, 6.

18 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 March 2023, p. 4; Submission 28, Dr Sarah Bernard, p. 4.

1.12 Professor Whitehouse told us that he has the privilege of being asked to review and look at education systems all around the world and ‘nobody is doing this perfectly.’¹⁹ Professor Girdler’s colleague, Professor Sven Bölte, told us later in the inquiry that education systems across OECD countries are experiencing similar challenges supporting autistic students because they are hanging on to traditional notions that neurodevelopmental disabilities are ‘clinical entities’ and ‘schools have not really understood that disabilities are something that is a responsibility that goes across society.’²⁰ Professor Girdler told us that this traditional divide between clinical services and education is no longer sustainable, given the numbers of students needing support:

... we are applying a twenty-first century understanding of neurodiversity and putting it in a twentieth century model of education with nineteenth century ideas of the most appropriate infrastructure to support these kids, and they just do not go.

*- Professor Andrew Whitehouse,
Telethon Kids Institute*

I think a lot of where children are learning their skills, developing, making friends and learning obviously is happening in schools. So you cannot have one hour of therapy once a week and expect that to be sufficient in supporting a kid who has significant behaviour challenges and social communication issues. I think you have to upskill the environment in the school and provide a community, a practice, that supports these children.²¹

1.13 Many families who gave evidence to the inquiry said they didn’t blame individual school staff for the lack of support available to their children and resulting harm. They recognised that staff were doing the best they could within the confines of the education system and with limited time, resources and expertise.²² Both Professor Whitehouse and Professor Girdler noted that schools realised that they are ‘swamped’ and ‘really not doing as well as they could do’²³, and ‘hungry’ to know more about supporting autistic students.²⁴ However, an inability to access or implement necessary supports for autistic students leaves school staff feeling overwhelmed and frustrated.²⁵

We have a responsibility to act, which also presents opportunities

1.14 Addressing the educational inequity and poor outcomes experienced by autistic students is, at its core, a responsibility. There are also significant personal, social and economic costs attached to failure to act. Without systemic change, the current challenges facing autistic

19 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 March 2023, p. 4.

20 Professor Sven Bölte, *Transcript of Evidence*, Karolinska Institutet, p. 5.

21 Professor Sonya Girdler, Curtin University, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 October 2023, p. 6.

22 Dr Emily Pearce, Furthering Autistic Children’s Education and Schooling, *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 September 2023 p. 9; Heidi Brandis, PDA Perth WA Parents Support Group, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, p. 7; Submission 22, Name withheld, p. 4; Submission 57, Name withheld, p. 1.

23 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 March 2023, p. 4.

24 Professor Sonya Girdler, Curtin University, *Transcript of Evidence*, 29 March 2023 p. 10.

25 Submission 55, Western Australian Primary Principals’ Association, p. 2.

children, their families and schools will not only persist but be exacerbated as autism prevalence continues to increase.²⁶

1.15 However, fulfilling this responsibility also presents opportunities. Professor Whitehouse told us that although Western Australia had often been a national leader in the provision of assessment services, therapies and supports to autistic children, we are now falling behind in that role. There is a role for the education system to be a leader once again and ‘set the tone’ for best practice in supporting autistic students at school and beyond.²⁷

Children with autism have the right to a good education suited to their needs. It is our responsibility to create the conditions to achieve successful school participation and inclusion. With the right support in place, students with autism can and do flourish in school.

- Autism Association of Western Australia

1.16 In light of other relevant pieces of work taking place, mostly at national level, in relation to child development, education, disability and autism (see Box 1), Professor Whitehouse laid out a challenge for the Committee to consider solutions with a Western Australian and autism-specific focus:

I think the lowest-hanging fruit that could have the biggest positive outcome on autistic kids in WA is: how can we get our schools better ready and better prepared to support autistic kids to be who they need to be within life?

1.17 Professor Whitehouse later noted that the challenges to be addressed by this inquiry have the potential to be outshone by the ‘once in a generation’ opportunity to make a positive impact the lives of autistic students, allowing them to be ‘active, contributing, happy, content and fulfilled members of society.’²⁸

26 Submission 30, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 4.

27 *ibid.*, Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 March 2023, p. 7.

28 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 October 2023 p. 9.

Box 1: Recent relevant reports, reviews and strategies – context for the inquiry

Numerous other pieces of relevant work have been recently or are currently being done, mostly at national level, in relation to child development, education, disability and autism, including:

- development of a National Autism Strategy (current), arising from the recommendations of the Senate Select Committee on Autism’s inquiry into services, support and life outcomes for autistic Australians (March 2022)
- the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (September 2023), which made numerous recommendations regarding inclusive education
- development of a national Early Years Strategy (current), and the WA Legislative Council’s Select Committee and inquiry into child development services (interim report December 2023)
- the Senate Education and Employment References Committee’s inquiry into the national trend of school refusal and related matters (August 2023), which noted that a significant proportion of students experiencing school refusal are neurodivergent
- the State School Teachers’ Union of WA’s review of public education (October 2023), which found that more support for students with special needs is needed, especially in disadvantaged schools
- the Independent Review into the National Disability Insurance Scheme (December 2023), which highlighted a lack of available and appropriate foundational supports.

During the course of this inquiry, the Minister for Education also announced a review of the *School Education Act 1999* to better safeguard students with disability and to strengthen access, inclusion and services across the public education system. Professor Whitehouse will provide expert input and strategic guidance during the review process.

Source: Hon. Dr Tony Buti MLA, Minister for Education, *Education review to serve and safeguard students with disability*, media release, 4 December 2023.

Autism in the context of neurodiversity

1.18 In formulating the terms of reference, the Committee considered the benefits and challenges of focusing the inquiry on autism, rather than neurodiversity. We are aware that neurodiverse students and students with other developmental conditions (such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia and dyspraxia) experience similar challenges accessing supports at school as autistic students, and it is not our intention to exclude this from our focus.

1.19 There is some concern that increasing focus on autism has the potential to distract attention from other students needing support due to disadvantage or other neurodevelopmental conditions.²⁹ Further, evidence to the inquiry has revealed the risks of creating ‘perverse’ incentives by linking support to a particular diagnosis rather than functional need.³⁰ These issues are explored later in this report.

29 Submission 30, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 8; Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 March 2023, p. 11.

30 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 March 2023, p. 3.

1.20 Ultimately, we settled on an autism-focused inquiry for the following reasons:

- **clarity** – given that neurodiversity is a social concept and not a diagnosis, there can be challenges defining it.
- **prevalence** – autism is the largest primary disability group of people accessing the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), and the largest group of students eligible for an Individual Disability Allocation (IDA) from the Department of Education, which provides some justification for an immediate and dedicated focus.
- **comparison** – other jurisdictions have adopted autism strategies, which can provide a useful point of comparison for considering how WA might benefit from adopting aspects of such strategies.
- **evidence-based practice is neurodiversity-affirming** – evidence-based approaches to supporting autistic students are neurodiversity-affirming, meaning they embrace each child’s unique understanding of other people and the world around them, without seeking to ‘cure’ autism.³¹ The benefits of this approach to supporting autistic students at school will also create benefits for other neurodiverse students.

1.21 We are confident that the findings and recommendations of this inquiry in relation to autism and autistic students are applicable to a broader range of neurodiverse students and will deliver flow-on benefits.

Differing views about retaining non-mainstream educational settings should not delay immediate action towards inclusion

1.22 Some stakeholders to the inquiry advocated that maintaining non-mainstream educational settings for students with disability, such as education support centres and schools and Specialist Learning Programs, is discriminatory and contravenes fundamental human rights principles of inclusive education.³² Square Peg Round Whole told us:

What we are asking for is a commitment to creating a plan to make this possible, if not in our children’s educational experience, for their children’s education experience, because at the moment there is no plan.³³

1.23 Other stakeholders highlighted the benefits of specialist settings, including greater resourcing, expertise, and the ability to help autistic students transition into mainstream schools.³⁴ They advocated for offering a variety of educational options ‘because they all prove beneficial at different times.’³⁵

1.24 This diversity of views was reflected in the recommendations of the Disability Royal Commission. Commissioners had differing views about whether settings exclusively for people with disability should be phased out over time. However, all Commissioners agreed

31 David Trembath et al., *National Guideline for supporting the learning, participation, and wellbeing of autistic children and their families in Australia*, Autism CRC, Brisbane, 2022, p. 8.

32 Submission 40, Square Peg Round Whole, p. 4; Submission 86, Jodie Wilde, p.3.

33 Symone Wheatley-Hey, Square Peg Round Whole, *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 September 2023, p. 6.

34 Submission 58, Further Autistic Children’s Education and Schooling, p. 6.

35 Niel Smith, Western Australian Primary Principals’ Association, *Transcript of Evidence*, 18 October 2023, p. 12.

that governments and educational authorities should progressively overcome the barriers to inclusive education in mainstream schools, and that mainstream education needs to be transformed to enable more children and young people to be educated in those settings, with such supports as they require.³⁶

1.25 In light of this, Professor Whitehouse summarised what he views as the task at hand in relation to advancing inclusive education:

There is a ‘now-for-now’ and a ‘now-for-later’ piece that it is inarguable that we need to develop an education system that is so far more inclusive of a broader range of kids than now. There are many kids that are educated within non-mainstream settings right now that could and should be in mainstream education, and it is a failure of our own imagination and policy setting that this has not happened just yet. That is the ‘now for later’. We must start that planning now and it must happen today.

There also is a ‘now for now’. What can we do now to ensure that a couple of generations of kids, until we eventually get to that point, are not chewed up by the system and, again, leave that system worse off than when they get there. I think we must look at the low-hanging fruit around teacher training, around how we build inclusive classrooms, around school leadership. They are the right now, the now for now, while also starting to plan towards what does a school system look like where education support is for fewer kids because our mainstream settings are true choices for families.³⁷

1.26 It is our view that the long-term future of non-mainstream education settings for all students with disability is beyond our expertise and the scope of this inquiry. Instead we have chosen to focus on the common ground, or the ‘low-hanging fruit’—overcoming barriers to inclusion for autistic students at school and promoting the enablers for evidence-based practice in schools to support autistic students. These are both vital goals in themselves, and the first steps on the path to achieving inclusive education.

Language used in this report

1.27 We understand and respect that there are different preferences among the autistic and autism communities around the language used to describe autism and people on the autism spectrum.

1.28 Throughout this inquiry, we have used identity first language (‘autistic students’), which reflects the belief that being autistic is a core part of a person’s identity. This is consistent with language used by the Autism Cooperative Research Centre (CRC), which is the independent national source of evidence for best practice in relation to autism across the lifespan and the spectrum. Their choice follows the lead of autistic individuals working within

36 Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, *Final Report, Executive Summary: Our vision for an inclusive Australia and Recommendations*, September 2023, pp. 89-90, 106.

37 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 October 2023, p. 9.

and with its national collaborative network, the majority of whom have indicated a preference for identity first language over person first language.³⁸

1.29 In relation to the term 'school refusal', we also understand that some stakeholders view this as misrepresenting a student's absence from school as a choice. Other preferred terminology includes 'school can't', 'school phobia', 'school avoidance', 'attendance anxiety', and 'emotionally based school avoidance'.³⁹ In this report, we have used the term 'school refusal', which is consistent with recent relevant reports by other parliamentary committees.

38 Autism CRC, *Language choices around autism and individuals on the autism spectrum*, accessed 19 December 2023, <<https://www.autismcrc.com.au/>>.

39 Senate Education and Employment References Committee, *The national trend of school refusal and related matters*, August 2023, p. 3.

Chapter 2

The prevalence of autism in WA and projected demand for support in schools

The prevalence of autism in Western Australia is increasing

2.1 There is no study in the last 10 years that has estimated the prevalence of autism in WA⁴⁰ and there can be challenges in estimating prevalence.⁴¹ The Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre (OTARC) identified variation in prevalence estimates across studies looking at WA data and recommended a comprehensive epidemiological study into autism prevalence across WA.⁴²

Schools are also experiencing unprecedented demands in terms of neurodiverse students, but neurodivergence is simply a fact of life, and is actually a really wonderful fact at that.

2.2 In the absence of a study indicating autism prevalence in WA, researchers are looking at existing data which provides insights. The Telethon Kids Institute pointed to estimates from a 2020 Australian study, which included children from WA, indicating that the prevalence of autism in Australia sits at 1 in 39 children.⁴³ By comparison, international studies have indicated prevalence in the United States is estimated to be around 1 in 36 children, while in the UK prevalence is estimated to be 1 in 57 children.⁴⁴

*- Professor Andrew Whitehouse,
Telethon Kids Institute*

2.3 Telethon Kids Institute referred to National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) data as an important source of information about autism in Australia, as the majority of individuals diagnosed with autism are accessing the scheme. What we see is:

- Autism is currently the largest primary disability category for the NDIS. One third of people receiving NDIS support have a primary autism diagnosis.
- 9 per cent of active NDIS participants with a diagnosis of autism reside in WA (approximately 18,800 people).
- 68 per cent of active NDIS participants with a diagnosis of autism are school aged (aged between 7-18 years).
- 65 per cent of autistic children accessing NDIS support attend schooling in a mainstream class.⁴⁵

40 Submission 30, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 3.

41 Submission 60, Department of Communities, p. 5.

42 Submission 27, Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre, p. 3.

43 Submission 30, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 3. The 2020 study referred to is the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children.

44 *ibid.*

45 *ibid.*

2.4 Telethon Kids Institute, the Department of Health and the Department of Communities observed that the prevalence of autism diagnosis is increasing in WA.⁴⁶ This increase is occurring across Australia and is consistent with recent global trends.⁴⁷

In the 1990s, prevalence of autism was approximately 1 in every 2,000 children and current estimated international prevalence rates are from 1 in 100.

2.5 Various factors are shaping the visibility of autism across the community—a key one of those is diagnosis. The Department of Health indicated that demand for autism diagnostic assessments within the Child Development Service (CDS) has grown significantly, with an 82 per cent increase between 2017/18 and 2021/22. This has been exceeded by a further 89 per cent increase in the last financial year.⁴⁸

- Department of Health

Table 2.1: Demand for diagnostic assessments within the Child and Adolescent Health Service: Child Development Service between 2017/18–2022/23

Financial year	Referrals for autism assessment (CAHS: CDS)
2017/18	302
2018/19	331
2019/20	405
2020/21	494
2021/22	550
2022/23	1,043

Finding 1

The prevalence of autism diagnosis in WA is increasing, which is consistent with Australian and global trends.

Autism diagnosis varies according to demographic factors

2.6 The Committee heard that diagnosis of autism can vary according to demographic factors such as gender, age, race and socio-economic status.⁴⁹

Gender

2.7 The prevalence rate of autism diagnosis for males is about four times the female rate.⁵⁰ Evidence to the Committee suggests it is not clear whether males are more likely to have

46 Submission 85, Department of Health, p. 3; Submission 30, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 3; Submission 60, Department of Communities, p. 5.

47 Submission 85, Department of Health, p. 3; Submission 30, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 3.

48 Submission 85, Department of Health, p. 2.

49 Submission 30, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 4.

50 *ibid.*

autism than females. Rather, we heard a range of concerns about females being underrepresented in diagnosis because their presentation is different to that of males.⁵¹

2.8 Reframing Autism told the Committee:

... while it remains true that more boys are formally identified as autistic than girls...it is likely that this discrepancy is more related to behavioural characteristics than gender. It may also stem from a lack of research about or including autistic females, so that our understanding of the many factors that might shape autistic girls' experiences and expression of autism is lacking.⁵²

2.9 Some parents told us their daughters were better at 'masking', which meant their autism diagnoses often came later:

Autism in girls is still underdiagnosed and particularly in primary school [where] they tend to mask quite successfully. This was the case for my daughter. As she has high intelligence, her average grades meant she did not appear at educational risk and socially she was able to mimic her peers until at least around age 9 or 10. Signs of autism were dismissed largely as parental fault or immaturity by teachers.⁵³

A huge factor affecting the apparent prevalence is our ability to recognise autistic females who go largely undiagnosed because of their ability to mask. This was the case for us—my daughter wasn't diagnosed until year 9 and by this point, her ability to cope with school, deal with anxiety was unbearable.⁵⁴

2.10 The Department of Health advised that although there is an increasing awareness of the need to consider possible underdiagnosis in girls, it may be that males are still more likely to have autism.⁵⁵

Age

2.11 The Committee heard that diagnosis for some children is reliable by age two. However, many individuals will obtain a diagnosis later in life due to barriers in accessing diagnostic services, or due to the characteristics or functional impacts of autism not becoming clear until the child is no longer developing in line with neurotypical age expectations.⁵⁶

Race, socio-economic status and location

2.12 Telethon Kids Institute observed that:

Race, socio-economic status and location have all been linked with variability in autism prevalence rates, with lower prevalence rates observed in people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. However, this has largely been linked to barriers to access diagnostic services for some groups, such as cost and availability

51 Submission 25, Name withheld, p. 1.

52 Submission 62, Reframing Autism, p. 2.

53 Submission 74, Georgina Ker, p. 1.

54 Submission 81, Name withheld, p. 1.

55 Submission 85, Department of Health, p. 4.

56 Submission 30, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 4.

of services, and likely does not represent a true lower prevalence of autism for these groups. Rather, disparities represent a delay or ‘miss’ in diagnosis.⁵⁷

2.13 This observation is consistent with accounts from educators and sector stakeholders who identified barriers to accessing services across certain groups, and also a lack of suitable resources.

2.14 A Disability Social Worker who specialises in autism told the Committee that many First Nations and CALD families they have worked with were not entirely open about their child’s difficulties when autism assessments were being undertaken. The two primary reasons for this are shame, because of cultural beliefs around disability, and fear of being judged as the cause of the child’s difficulties and subsequent potential involvement with child protection.⁵⁸

2.15 Positive Partnerships told the Committee that across Australia, there is a lack of culturally appropriate tools and resources for Aboriginal families. The Committee heard that until recently:

... researchers have largely overlooked the relevance of culture with regard to autism. Nowhere is this truer than in Australia, where virtually nothing is known about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders experiences of autism.⁵⁹

2.16 Adam Howie, National Coordinator, First Nations School and Community Programs described how among some Aboriginal people there can be ‘quite a big cultural shame factor for autism.’⁶⁰ A lot of that can be attributed to historical events, but also to the way Aboriginal children are labelled. Mr Howie told the Committee:

A lot of feedback that we get from families through parent and carer workshops and educator workshops is, “Oh, the first comment made by the school was ‘that was just another naughty Aboriginal child’.” Then the second step, and this is from feedback, is, “Oh, we might go down the FASD line.” And then the third step is, “Oh, maybe they’re neurodiverse.”⁶¹

2.17 Positive Partnerships explained how, in this context, Aboriginal families can be scared of getting an autism diagnosis because their child might get an incorrect diagnosis of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).⁶²

2.18 An educator observed that in regional and remote areas, individuals are less likely to obtain an autism diagnosis:

I have worked in every region across WA for 33 years—many remote, regional and metro scenarios—autism is the same in all areas. Only difference is, in regional and

57 Submission 30, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 4.

58 Submission 47, Name withheld, p. 2.

59 Adam Howie, Positive Partnerships, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, p. 2, quoting Rozanna Lilley, Mikala Sedgwick & Elizabeth Pellicano, *“We Look After Our Own Mob”: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Experiences of Autism*, Macquarie University, Sydney, 2019, p. 6.

60 Adam Howie, Positive Partnerships, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, p. 8.

61 *ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

62 Submission 67, Positive Partnerships, p. 2.

remote areas it often goes undiagnosed due to lack of practitioners and availability of assessment.⁶³

- 2.19 Catholic Education Western Australia (CEWA) told the Committee that the number of students in rural and remote areas diagnosed with autism may be underestimated due to limited access to diagnosticians in those regions.⁶⁴

Autism diagnosis does not always capture certain profiles

- 2.20 The Committee received a significant amount of evidence from the parents of children who have a Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) profile. PDA is typified by the resistance or avoidance of everyday demands and expectations to an extreme extent, often using social strategies such as distracting or giving excuses as part of the avoidance. This is driven by an anxiety-based need to be in control.⁶⁵
- 2.21 One of the challenges experienced by many families is the limited recognition that a PDA profile has in autism diagnosis in Australia. The PDA Perth WA Parents Support Group (PDA Support Group) described how although the PDA profile is referenced in the *National Guideline for the Assessment and Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorders in Australia* (National Assessment and Diagnosis Guideline), it is a limited acknowledgment of the set of symptoms.⁶⁶ The group describes how although Australian practitioners are increasingly recognising the profile and adding it to diagnoses, there are many practitioners who are not aware of the profile and some dispute its existence.⁶⁷
- 2.22 This contrasts with the United Kingdom, where a specific diagnostic tool is used to identify and assess PDA profiles. The PDA Support Group is calling for the National Assessment and Diagnosis Guideline to expand on its current acknowledgment of PDA,⁶⁸ finding that better recognition of PDA as a diagnosis should provide for easier and more targeted school support for children and their families.⁶⁹

Finding 2

Some individuals who fit the criteria for an autism diagnosis will experience delays or not obtain a diagnosis, because of barriers to accessing diagnostic services.

Finding 3

Barriers to obtaining a diagnosis are more profound across certain demographics than others.

63 Submission 77, Name withheld, p. 1.

64 Submission 16, Catholic Education Western Australia, p. 5.

65 Andrew Whitehouse et al., *National Guideline for the Assessment and Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorders in Australia*, Autism CRC, Brisbane, 2018, p. 50.

66 Submission 45, PDA Perth WA Parents Support Group, pp. 6-7.

67 *ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

68 *ibid.*, p. 7.

69 *ibid.*, p. 8.

Finding 4

Because of the barriers some groups face in obtaining an autism diagnosis, it is not always the most appropriate basis for determining whether an individual requires support.

Multiple factors are affecting the prevalence of autism

- 2.23 The Committee heard there are various key factors affecting the prevalence of autism: the expansion of the diagnostic boundaries of autism, greater awareness of autism among parents and clinicians, and system factors that are incentivising diagnosis. We heard that these are the key factors driving prevalence, even though there are some environmental factors that might be impacting on the rates of autism we are seeing across the globe.⁷⁰

Expansion of diagnostic boundaries

- 2.24 We heard that over time, our conception of autism has changed and we have experienced an expansion of diagnostic boundaries. Professor Andrew Whitehouse points to how:

The expansion of diagnostic boundaries has meant individuals who would previously have been placed under a different “diagnostic banner” are now more likely to receive a primary diagnosis of autism. This is particularly true for the diagnoses of language disorders and intellectual disability, and the prevalence of these conditions has decreased over the past two decades as autism diagnoses have increased.⁷¹

- 2.25 Professor Whitehouse explained that:

Twenty years ago or 30 years ago, one would really only get a diagnosis of autism if they were not communicating verbally and had intellectual disability. What has happened over time is that the way we have diagnosed autism has recognised that people can meet criteria for autism but also have intellectual abilities within normal limits or above normal limits. So our diagnostic boundaries of autism went from a very small group of people to a larger group of people. That was a legitimate expansion of the diagnostic boundaries.⁷²

- 2.26 The Department of Health found that increased prevalence may reflect a change in interpretation of the autism diagnostic criteria.⁷³ The Department of Communities told us that inconsistent diagnostic protocols for the assessment of autism may also be a factor in increasing prevalence rates.⁷⁴

70 Professor Sonya Girdler, Curtin Autism Research Group, *Transcript of Evidence*, 29 March 2023, p. 13.

71 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, 'Do more children have autism now than before?', *The Conversation* (web-based), 5 December 2011, accessed 9 November 2023, <<https://theconversation.com/do-more-children-have-autism-now-than-before-4497>>.

72 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 October 2023, pp. 4-5.

73 Submission 85, Department of Health, p. 3.

74 Submission 60, Department of Communities, p. 6.

Increased awareness

- 2.27 Evidence to the inquiry pointed to a significant increase in awareness of autism across the community, including with respect to clinicians, parents, educators, health care providers and advocacy groups. Increased awareness of autism and available supports are driving parents to seek diagnosis.
- 2.28 Telethon Kids Institute told us that ‘where children are developing differently, autism is often the very first thing that both parents, as well as clinicians, are thinking about at that time.’⁷⁵
- 2.29 A parent of an autistic child told the Committee, ‘I do believe that autism is more prevalent in schools, because the parents of neurodiverse children now have access to more information and resources.’⁷⁶
- 2.30 CEWA observed there is increased community awareness of autism, the diagnostic criteria and the process of obtaining a diagnosis. Further, there is increased knowledge and understanding of best practice strategies that support individuals with autism.⁷⁷
- 2.31 The Department of Health indicated that prevalence is increasing with greater recognition and awareness of autism, combined with increased rates of diagnosis-seeking by autistic individuals with lower support needs.⁷⁸ We heard that as the evidence base for effective autism strategies has grown, families may be more likely to seek out a ‘complete’ diagnosis for children with other diagnosed disabilities.⁷⁹ The Department of Health told us that, for example:
- ... historically some children with intellectual disability and autism may have accessed services and educational supports based on their diagnosis of intellectual disability (e.g. been placed in education support schools or classrooms) and not been diagnosed or assessed for autism.⁸⁰
- 2.32 Australia is also at the forefront of early autism identification.⁸¹ This is particularly important in light of research establishing that early intervention and supports can reduce the level of support that autistic and neurodivergent children require as they grow up (see Box 2).

75 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 October 2023, pp. 4-5.

76 Submission 46, Name withheld, p. 1.

77 Submission 16, Catholic Education Western Australia, p. 5.

78 Submission 85, Department of Health, p. 3.

79 *ibid.*, p. 3.

80 *ibid.*, p. 3.

81 Nancy Sadka and Josephine Barbaro, ‘Australia’s rates of autism should be celebrated – but real-life impact, not diagnosis, should determine NDIS support’, *The Conversation* (web-based), 22 November 2023, accessed 28 February 2024 <<https://theconversation.com/au>>.

Box 2: Early autism detection and intervention in Australia: SACS, ASDetect and Inklings

La Trobe University's Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre (OTARC) has revolutionised how professionals are trained to screen for autism in very young children. The Social Attention and Communication Surveillance (SACS) method identifies behaviours or 'early markers' characteristic of autism in children as young as 12 months old. 82 per cent of babies who show early behavioural signs of Autism at 12, 18 and 24 months using the SACS method go on to be diagnosed with autism, making it the most accurate tool for early autism detection in the world. In 2018, under a commitment in the Victorian Autism Plan, OTARC trained all (~1,700) maternal and child health nurses in Victoria using the SACS to improve access to autism assessment, diagnosis and early supports. A parent resource booklet was also developed, with over 40,000 copies distributed since September 2019.

Using the SACS method as a framework, OTARC developed a free early identification app called ASDetect, which was launched in February 2016. The app enables parents to easily identify potential signs of autism using age-appropriate assessments and videos of autistic and non-autistic children to illustrate social communication milestones. After the assessment, parents receive a result of either low or high likelihood of autism, and a detailed results email which they can take to their doctor which ensures they receive the support necessary to make informed decisions about their child's care. In 2022, the Federal Select Committee on Autism recommended promotion of the use of ASDetect by families, healthcare professionals and educators.

Inklings is an early support program for babies aged 6-18 months at increased likelihood of disability associated with autism. It is based on research evidence which found that 'pre-emptive' therapy in infancy can lead to such a significant improvement in children's social development that they then fall below the threshold for a clinical autism diagnosis. The Federal Government is investing in the implementation of the Inklings program in multiple states and territories in Australia. In WA, the National Disability Insurance Agency partnered with the Telethon Kids Institute and WA health agencies to implement Inklings, which commenced in late 2023.

Source: Submission 30, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 2; Submission 27, Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre, pp. 11-12.

Our systems are driving families to diagnosis—NDIS and school systems

- 2.33 The Committee heard there are system factors that are driving an increase in autism diagnosis—most significantly, the NDIS and state education systems.
- 2.34 The Department of Health advised that families may be motivated to pursue an autism diagnosis for their children to access more supports.

A diagnosis of [autism] assists in allowing access to various supports and services for children and families including within educational systems and from the NDIS (for children aged 7 years and older). Various other types of neurodevelopmental diagnoses that children may present with do not attract support within such systems. For instance, a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or mental health concerns does not meet eligibility criteria for NDIS; a diagnosis of Developmental Language Disorder would not attract additional funded support for a child in a mainstream school setting. These are frequent comorbid and differential diagnostic considerations for children accessing an autism assessment.⁸²

⁸² Submission 85, Department of Health, p. 3.

- 2.35 We heard that increased awareness of autism and the effectiveness of interventions, accompanied by the availability of services through the NDIS, is seeing growing numbers of parents seeking a diagnosis for their child. Professor Sonya Girdler explained:

Now we have NDIS, if you get a diagnosis, you can get support, so there are services... we have more awareness of improving outcomes for individuals, early intervention, so if you realise there is something wrong with your child and you seek early intervention, you are likely to improve outcomes in the longer term...

Parents are looking for that. Everyone wants the best for their child, and with that increased community awareness, parents are more likely to seek a diagnosis.⁸³

- 2.36 Diagnosis as a means to accessing support within systems is evident with respect to the NDIS and to a degree within the Department of Education, although there is some recognition that the Department is attempting to move away from that.⁸⁴ Professor Whitehouse explained:

The demand for school supports is outstripping the supply of the amount of supports that are there for kids. To receive supports, families are seeking ways that they can get supports any way they can. I really want to be clear that nobody can blame families for this; I would do the same for my own children. But what we have seen is that that has been an incentive towards diagnosis so that families can get the support that they need and deserve.⁸⁵

- 2.37 This drive toward diagnosis has significant effects in our systems—we are seeing children who do not necessarily meet the criteria for autism being diagnosed with autism and we are experiencing inflated diagnostic waitlists.

... the education system is seeing more kids with autism diagnoses and perhaps a certain proportion of those kids actually do not meet criteria for autism. They still require support; they just do not meet criteria for autism.

- Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute

- 2.38 The Western Australian Secondary School Executives Association told us there is ‘a lot of suggestion of over diagnosis of autism’ and, if this is the case, it could be because an autism diagnosis attracts funding that other conditions do not. In this context:

... a misdiagnosis that has support is better than no diagnosis at all. If we went from a medical model to a behavioural model, that would significantly help because it means that we can give the kids the targeted support that they need, not something that might be called autism.⁸⁶

83 Professor Sonya Girdler, Curtin Autism Research Group, *Transcript of Evidence*, 29 March 2023, p. 13.

84 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 October 2023, pp. 4-5.

85 *ibid.*

86 Melissa Gillett, Western Australian Secondary School Executives Association, *Transcript of Evidence*, 18 October 2023, p. 14.

- 2.39 In terms of why we are seeing a trend of more children needing support, Professor Whitehouse explained ‘there are simply more kids struggling now than ever.’⁸⁷ We heard that increasingly, ‘as a community, we have systematically raised every risk factor for kids and systematically depressed every protective factor for kids, so we are seeing more and more kids presenting with challenges.’⁸⁸ In a climate where children and young people are experiencing significant challenges, and systems are geared to drive families towards an autism diagnosis as a means of obtaining the support their child needs—we are seeing numbers of autism diagnoses increase.
- 2.40 The challenges in obtaining a diagnosis; the suitability of a diagnosis to determine support for a student; the increasing numbers of diagnosis, and the flow-on effect of long wait times for diagnosis—necessitate that the Department of Education provides support to students who do not have a diagnosis. This report considers the Department’s current efforts to move away from support being reliant upon an autism diagnosis in Chapter 6.

The prevalence of autism will continue to increase and schools will need to change to support autistic students

- 2.41 The message from lead autism researchers concerning the trajectory of prevalence was clear: ‘It is only going to increase. I cannot see anything else changing.’⁸⁹
- 2.42 We heard that if prevalence rates continue to rise it will become increasingly likely that most classrooms in WA will have at least one autistic student.⁹⁰ Through our inquiry we heard that currently there are many autistic students who are struggling at school because they aren’t receiving adequate support. There is widespread recognition that in the context of increasing prevalence, system changes are needed to ensure positive outcomes for autistic students.
- 2.43 The Department of Health told us that as the increased prevalence of autism diagnosis makes additional children eligible for supports in schools within the current system, it will be important to ensure children who have additional learning, mental health and behaviour support needs continue to access high quality supports to enable them to access the curriculum at school and to participate in their community:

Every child should have the opportunity to access appropriate supports and environmental adjustments to meet their learning and wellbeing needs. These supports should be appropriately funded, as evidence shows investment in children and early intervention has positive developmental, social and economic outcomes.⁹¹

87 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 October 2023, pp. 4-5.

88 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 March 2023, p. 2. For further detail, see Professor Andrew Whitehouse, ‘More children than ever are struggling with developmental concerns. We need to help families connect and thrive’, *The Conversation*, 19 July 2023, accessed 22 February 2024, <<https://theconversation.com/au>>.

89 Professor Sonya Girdler, Curtin Autism Research Group, *Transcript of Evidence*, 29 March 2023, p. 14.

90 Submission 30, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 4.

91 Submission 85, Department of Health, p. 5.

- 2.44 Trends across the autism population in schools need to be considered in system planning. One consideration raised was the flow-on effect of a shift toward early diagnosis, as Professor Sonya Girdler explained:

... we have been increasing in diagnosis in younger children for the last 20 years—those children are now teenagers, so there is a wave of adolescents coming through... there is a real need for interventions in the teenage years and young adult years. There has been an enormous amount of investment in early intervention and programs, which is important, absolutely. But I feel we must not forget about our teenagers and our young people. There are many of them who need a lot of support.⁹²

- 2.45 We heard that understanding the prevalence of autism in schools is crucial for developing appropriate supports to ensure inclusivity and promote positive outcomes for autistic students.⁹³ OTARC noted that there is variation in prevalence estimates across existing studies, which highlights the likely lack of diagnostic services and expertise, particularly in rural, regional and remote areas, and the need for a more comprehensive epidemiological study into autism prevalence across Western Australia. It recommended that such a study be undertaken to enable equitable provision of appropriate diagnosis and support services for autistic people and their families before and during schooling.⁹⁴ Telethon Kids Institute recommended that the Department of Education use trend data from within and outside of Australia to predict and prepare for the current and future needs of autistic children within the WA school system.⁹⁵ The Committee sees this sort of planning as essential to the strategic approach the Department of Education and other government agencies need to enact to ensure autistic students receive the support they need and agrees with both recommendations.

Recommendation 1

That the Premier provide funding for a comprehensive epidemiological study into the prevalence of autism or autism likelihood in young children in Western Australia.

Recommendation 2

That the Minister for Education direct the Department of Education to use trend data from within and outside Australia to predict and prepare for the current and future needs of autistic children within the WA school system.

92 Professor Sonya Girdler, Curtin Autism Research Group, *Transcript of Evidence*, 29 March 2023, p. 14.

93 Submission 5, Western Australian Education Support Principals and Administrators Association, p. 1.

94 Submission 27, Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre, pp. 5-6.

95 Submission 30, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 5.

Chapter 3

Evidence-based practice for supporting autistic students at school

Supports for autistic students exist at many levels

3.1 In their submissions to the inquiry, the Department of Education and Catholic Education Western Australia (CEWA) outlined current supports for autistic students at their schools. We have not reproduced these in the report, but referred to them where they are relevant. It is worth noting that supports for autistic students at school exist at many levels, including:

- direct interactions between students and staff within the learning environment, such as evidence-based practices and interventions, educational adjustments and differentiation
- interactions between other relevant stakeholders, including families and other professionals involved in supporting students – for example, therapists
- legislation, policies and systems, including finances and resources available to schools
- values, beliefs, attitudes and culture.⁹⁶

The National Guidelines define evidence-based practice for supporting autistic children

3.2 When asked about key successes with respect to putting autism research findings into practice, Professor Whitehouse referred to the Autism CRC's development of two national guidelines:

- the *National Guideline for the Assessment and Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorders in Australia* (National Assessment and Diagnosis Guideline). This was developed to outline processes for both diagnostic decision-making and the comprehensive assessment of individual support needs, with the aim of improving diagnostic practices and consistency across the country.⁹⁷
- the *National Guideline for supporting the learning, participation and wellbeing of autistic children and their families in Australia* (National Supporting Autistic Children Guideline). This was developed to ensure that practitioners providing support to autistic children and

96 Iva Strnadová et al., *A review and synthesis of educational supports for students with disability: Evidence based practices in Australia. Summary review*. UNSW, Sydney, 2020, p. 9.

97 Andrew Whitehouse et al., *National Guideline for the Assessment and Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorders in Australia*, Autism CRC, Brisbane, 2018, p. x.

their families do so in ways that are safe, effective and desirable to children and their families.⁹⁸

- 3.3 Professor Whitehouse described the development of these National Guidelines as ‘a major success’ and ‘our biggest weapon in getting consistent, high-quality practice across Australia’:

We defined evidence-based practice. One of the challenges in the area of autism is that everyone comes with their own truth, so everyone comes with their own evidence: “My evidence says this; my evidence says this.” These guidelines say this is the clear evidence we all agree on; here we are. The key challenge now is to make sure these are implemented across Australia.⁹⁹

Evidence-based practices are neurodiversity-affirming and incorporate the lived experience and preferences of autistic children and their families

- 3.4 The National Supporting Autistic Children Guideline is aimed at practitioners and clinicians involved in selecting, planning, delivering and monitoring supports for autistic children and their families. Its consensus-based recommendations draw on evidence from research literature, combined with evidence collected through extensive community consultation.¹⁰⁰ Although the recommendations were not developed specifically for teachers and other educators, the Guideline recognises that they may find the recommendations relevant to their practice.¹⁰¹ Further, its guiding principles are intended to help policy makers when making decisions about services and supports in the best interests of autistic children. This includes that supports should be:

- evidence-based, meaning they should reflect the best available research evidence, integrated with evidence from clinical practice and the lived experience of autistic people and their families, and the preferences and unique context of each child and family
- neurodiversity-affirming, meaning they should embrace each child’s unique understanding of other people and the world around them, without seeking to ‘cure’ autism.¹⁰²

- 3.5 These principles reflect the cultural shift prompted by the neurodiversity movement. Modern research now recognises autism as a brain difference that can be linked with strengths and adaptive strategies, as well as challenges and functional impairments. While previous interventions and supports have focused on reducing autism characteristics or autism ‘severity’ by changing a child’s behaviour, this focus is now outdated and no longer aligned with the views and preferences of the majority of the autistic and autism communities. Modern, neurodiversity-affirming supports focus first on valuing and leveraging the strengths, preferences and characteristics of the individual, as well as

98 David Trembath et al., *National Guideline for supporting the learning, participation, and wellbeing of autistic children and their families in Australia*, Autism CRC, Brisbane, 2022, p. 1.

99 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 March 2023, p. 6.

100 David Trembath et al., *National Guideline for supporting the learning, participation, and wellbeing of autistic children and their families in Australia*, Autism CRC, Brisbane, 2022, p. 34.

101 *ibid.*, p. 27.

102 *ibid.*, pp. 51, 54.

recognising and reducing environmental and systemic barriers to participation, before considering supports that seek to change aspects of the individual.¹⁰³

- 3.6 It is now also increasingly recognised that autistic voices have not been traditionally considered or emphasised in evaluating interventions and supports for autistic people, and that practices must have social validity, which is the overall acceptability of an intervention beyond just its effectiveness.¹⁰⁴ A recent NSW review of evidence-based practices to support students with disability found that there was low emphasis in Australian research on measuring the social validity of educational supports and student voice.¹⁰⁵ The Autism CRC's Participatory and Inclusive Autism Research Practice Guides reflect a shift towards inclusive and participatory research practices which empower autistic people and value their lived experience.¹⁰⁶

Finding 5

National Guidelines have defined evidence-based practice for supporting autistic children, which includes that supports should be neurodiversity-affirming and reflect the lived experience and preferences of autistic children and their families.

Recommendation 3

That the Minister for Education ensure that all relevant legislative and policy frameworks align with the *National Guideline for supporting the learning, participation and wellbeing of autistic children and their families in Australia*.

Some autistic students are well supported at school

- 3.7 The Committee heard from families and stakeholders who had positive experiences with support for autistic children at school. Their experiences reflect supports and practices that are neurodiversity-affirming, individualised and aligned with the preferences of autistic students and their families.

Some staff recognise and respond well to the needs of autistic students

- 3.8 The Telethon Kids Institute told the Committee of the importance of autism-informed teachers:

... a teacher who has really great knowledge of autism and what it looks like has played a really key role in identifying a child early on in kindy and pre-primary and

103 Submission 30, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 5.

104 See, for example, Matthew Lerner, Ava Gurba, Dena Gassner, 'A framework for neurodiversity-affirming interventions for autistic individuals', *Journal of consulting and clinical psychology*, vol. 91, no. 9, September 2023, p. 503; Traci-Ann Garrad et al., 'From research to reality: Australian evidence-based practice in autism education', *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 2021, p. 2; Kevin Callahan et al., 'Social validity of Evidence-Based Practices and Emerging Interventions in Autism', *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2017, p. 188.

105 Iva Strnadová et al., *A review and synthesis of educational supports for students with disability: Evidence based practices in Australia. Summary report*. UNSW, Sydney, 2020, pp. 11, 24.

106 Jac den Houting, *Participatory and Inclusive Autism Research Practice Guides*, Autism CRC, Brisbane, 2021.

who has played a pivotal role in getting that family access to the early supports needed.¹⁰⁷

3.9 One parent reported the key to their success was having a couple of teachers at their school who were aware of neurodiversity, including a kindergarten teacher who picked up on subtle developmental differences and an assistant principal who themselves had an autistic child. This parent also believed that pairing a trusted education assistant (EA) with the student as they progress through school has helped their child's anxiety.¹⁰⁸

3.10 The Western Australian Council of State School Organisations (WACSSO) reported that, in many cases, parents rely on individual staff with lived experience or significant experience working in this area to show a deeper understanding of the challenges children living with autism face.¹⁰⁹ Kiind reported that successful support is often 'personality-driven':

... parents speak of individual teachers who can be very collaborative or effective in their approach, but this is seldom reflective of a wider school culture and more often dependent on the individual teacher's own values and motivators.¹¹⁰

There are some silver linings. Strong leadership in schools, a can-do attitude, flexibility, and genuine engagement with families and allied health supports, and a supportive school community can make a world of difference.

- A parent

School culture is inclusive and offers flexibility

3.11 Inclusive school culture is fostered by principals and leaders who emphasise the importance of strong relationships between teachers and students, and that 'every student belongs.'¹¹¹ Staff are given permission and time to consult with students and families and make appropriate accommodations.¹¹² However, this leadership and supportive culture is also often dependent on 'the belief system, values and personal experiences of the Principal and/or Vice-Principal.'¹¹³

3.12 The South West Autism Network (SWAN) highlighted that accommodations made for autistic students often benefit the whole classroom:

What we do see is that when accommodations are made in the classroom, they are benefiting the entire classroom. Teachers frequently tell us that when they start using visual schedules and they start writing the instructions on the whiteboard, the entire class benefits. We see that when they put in sensory spaces and when they make adjustments to reduce noise, the entire class benefits.¹¹⁴

107 Sarah Pillar, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 October 2023, p. 6.

108 Submission 40, Square Peg Round Whole WA, p. 22.

109 Submission 63, Western Australian Council of State School Organisations, p. 4.

110 Submission 39, Kiind, p. 11.

111 Reneé Darbyshir, Kiind, *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 September 2023, p. 6.

112 Carrie Clark, Kiind, *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 September 2023, p. 6.

113 Submission 7, Name withheld, p. 1.

114 Nick Avery, South West Autism Network, *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 September 2023, p. 2.

3.13 Parents told us that flexibility and accommodations can make a huge difference to making their child feel welcome and engaged at school. Parents have reported that their children benefit when schools:

- offer flexibility within their usual policies and procedures according to need, such as staggering start times, lunch times, and providing sensory breaks¹¹⁵
- create appropriately supervised safe and quiet places for students to access when overwhelmed or overstimulated, along with clearly communicated guidelines for how and when the spaces can be used¹¹⁶
- allow headphones, stimming or sensory products and assistive technology¹¹⁷
- get children working in pairs or small groups to assist students who become overwhelmed in large groups¹¹⁸
- offer flexibility regarding attendance, dropping non-core subjects, completion of homework and alternative assessment methods.¹¹⁹

Schools communicate well and genuinely engage with families and therapists

3.14 Parents reported that their autistic children have benefitted when there is good communication between schools, families, and service providers, such as:

- consistent and regular communication and collaboration with families to provide updates on both home and school activities¹²⁰
- schools positively engaging and collaborating with other external services such as National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) therapists, behaviour support practitioners or medical practitioners such as paediatricians¹²¹
- developing Individual Education Plans with parental input, that reflect student needs, and are easily understood by parents.¹²²

3.15 WACSSO said that most parents who responded to the survey they prepared for their submission reported a high level of communication with their child's school, through in-person meetings, phone

Our school now works with the parents and takes the time to understand the child. They took the time to understand our son and treat him as an individual.

- South West Autism Network

115 Submission 47, Name withheld, p. 5.

116 *ibid.*

117 Submission 89, South West Autism Network, p. 22.

118 Submission 40, Square Peg Round Whole WA, p. 20.

119 *ibid.*, pp. 19-21; Submission 45, PDA Perth WA Parents Support Group, p. 12.

120 Submission 47, Name withheld, p. 5.

121 *ibid.*

122 *ibid.*, p. 6.

and email conversations and connections achieved through technology and apps.¹²³

Specialist Learning Programs are supporting autistic students at risk of disengagement

- 3.16 From 2016, Specialist Learning Programs (SLPs) were established within mainstream schools to cater for autistic students without accompanying intellectual disability.¹²⁴ The aim of SLPs is to assist a ‘niche’ group of students who didn’t previously fit anywhere else to access the curriculum when they experience social, emotional, or behavioural issues and challenges directly attributed to autism.¹²⁵ SLPs are unique in that they are located within mainstream schools, apply evidence based strategies, are offered from Kindergarten to Year 12 with exit option points, and are different at every school.¹²⁶
- 3.17 Enrolment and waitlisting in these programs have increased significantly, with the state government in March 2022 approving additional funding for eight new schools by 2025.¹²⁷ The Autism Association of Western Australia said that the expansion of SLPs had been well received, as they provided a ‘much-needed alternative’ for vulnerable students at risk of disengagement or underachievement.¹²⁸
- 3.18 The Committee visited the SLPs at Alkimos College and Alkimos Primary School and spoke to staff, students and parents. Department of Education representatives explained that SLPs were designed to provide students with a safe and secure place of belonging and to bridge the gap between mainstream and specialised settings.¹²⁹ Parents reported their children made significant progress since joining SLPs and told us of the following positive experiences:
- At school, he was nervous, cried and was upset—he was being bullied. The SLP was a safe place for him.
 - At primary school he didn’t really have any friends. Now he has a massive group of friends in and outside of school—a lot of his friends are part of the SLP... He is more confident, funny and outgoing since starting the program. He has now exited back to mainstream and is a lot more independent.
 - He was previously tagged as a ‘naughty kid’ but has been in the SLP for two years and is now in mainstream 85 per cent of the time. He loves school now.
 - My experience with the SLP has been life-changing, it’s not just the SLP—it’s across the school, including the culture among mainstream students.¹³⁰

123 Submission 63, Western Australian Council of State School Organisations, p. 4.

124 Submission 87, Department of Education, p. 11.

125 Submission 87, Department of Education, p. 11; Stuart Percival and Debbie Hawthorn, Department of Education, *Briefing*, 21 July 2023.

126 *ibid.*

127 Submission 87, Department of Education, p. 11.

128 Submission 78, Autism Association of Western Australia, p. 13.

129 Stuart Percival and Debbie Hawthorn, Department of Education, *Briefing*, 21 July 2023.

130 Parents of Specialist Learning Program students, Alkimos College and Alkimos Primary School, *Briefing*, 21 July 2023.

- 3.19 Schools also report that SLPs create wider benefits across their mainstream school environments, increasing autism awareness, support and skills and contributing to a culture of inclusivity.¹³¹
- 3.20 Parents also reported positive experiences with other alternative programs, such as Big Picture schools.¹³² These innovative programs are not autism-specific but offer personalised, passion-based learning which is beneficial for many autistic students. Key features of Big Picture programs include a less formal classroom environment, in-depth internships with external mentors, assessment via portfolios and exhibitions, one-on-one or small group learning and a strong relationship between students and their advisory teacher.¹³³

Assistance from the School of Special Educational Needs: Disability can have positive impacts for students and schools

- 3.21 WA public schools have access to professional support and a range of professional learning and resources through the School of Special Educational Needs: Disability (SSEN:D). SSEN:D builds the capacity of public schools by promoting inclusive learning environments through research and evidence-based practice. This ensures students with disability, including autism, can access the curriculum on the same basis as their peers.¹³⁴
- 3.22 We heard some positive feedback about the impact of support offered by SSEN:D.¹³⁵ However, the limitations of its current model are also discussed later in this report.
- 3.23 SSEN:D support is informed by an autism advisory group, established in 2021 to ensure practice is aligned with current research and evidence. This was a response to the increasing numbers of students with an autism diagnosis or imputed disability that made up over 80 per cent of the requests for assistance to SSEN:D.¹³⁶ Professor Whitehouse is a member of this group and said SSEN:D had been ‘extremely proactive in seeking to find ways in which they can bring in external expertise and evidence to better guide the way that they support students.’¹³⁷ Stakeholders have noted there is more work to be done in aligning current approaches with best practice, particularly with respect to Applied Behaviour Analysis and effective supports for students with Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) profiles (as discussed in Chapter 7).¹³⁸ However, it has been noted that SSEN:D is receptive to new information and approaches (see, for example Box 4 in Chapter 4), which leaves stakeholders hopeful that positive changes will emerge.¹³⁹

131 Stuart Percival and Debbie Hawthorn, Department of Education, *Briefing*, 21 July 2023; Mark Utley, Coodnaup College, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 3, 5.

132 Submission 21, Tanya Princi, p. 7; Submission 39, Kiind, p. 14.

133 Big Picture Learning Australia, *The Big Picture design for learning and school*, accessed 26 February 2024, <<https://www.bigpicture.org.au/>>.

134 Submission 87, Department of Education, p. 8.

135 Submission 80, Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association of Western Australia, p. 2; Nick Avery, South West Autism Network, *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 September 2023, p. 3.

136 School of Special Educational Needs: Disability, *Annual Report 2021*, p. 4.

137 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 October 2023, p. 7.

138 Submission 45, PDA Perth WA Parents Support Group, p. 9; Submission 78, Autism Association of Western Australia, pp. 13-14.

139 Heidi Brandis, PDA Perth WA Parents Support Group, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, p. 9.

Teachers and school staff want to learn more

- 3.24 It is worth noting that, in evidence to the inquiry, it has been teachers themselves who have been calling for more training opportunities to learn how to better support autistic students.¹⁴⁰ There are many teachers who have an invested interest and passion to create a meaningful learning experience for students with diverse learning needs. These teachers seek out training and support independently.¹⁴¹ Professor Girdler told us that training opportunities run by the Curtin Autism Research Group are met with ‘a lot of excitement and enthusiasm’ and they receive enquiries from many teachers and schools about participation.¹⁴² Positive Partnerships noted similarly high demand for their professional development workshops, and that ‘teachers reach out to us because they want to know more and understand more about the students that they are supporting in their classes.’¹⁴³

It would be useful to hear about Autism and ADHD from people with their own personal lived experience.

- Submission 40, a teacher’s comment to Square Peg Round Whole

Finding 6

Some autistic students are experiencing success with current supports. This is often attributable to individual school leaders or staff with specific values, knowledge or lived experience of autism.

Evidence-based practice to support autistic students is fragmented and inconsistent

- 3.25 Key stakeholders to the inquiry firmly agreed that there is no consistent approach to the implementation of evidence-based practices that support autistic students at school:

What we have found at the moment is fragmented supports... how people access that support is very fragmented. It depends on the leadership of the schools, the principals or the deputy principals.¹⁴⁴

There is so much variation from one school to the next, from one staff member to the next, between private schools and public schools and independent schools.¹⁴⁵

Currently, implementation of evidence-based practice across the school system is highly inconsistent. Professionals and parents widely report that the services, practices and strategies used are inconsistent

I think at the moment the sort of teacher by teacher, principal by principal, school by school approach is failing so many kids.

- Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute

140 Submission 40, Square Peg Round Whole, p. 16.

141 Submission 78, Autism Association of Western Australia, p. 9.

142 Professor Sonya Girdler, Curtin Autism Research Group, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 October 2023, p. 3.

143 Chris Champion and Rebecca Wahlsten, Positive Partnerships, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, pp. 3-6.

144 Grace Lazard, Autism Association of Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 30 August 2023, p. 3.

145 Nick Avery, South West Autism Network, *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 September 2023, p. 7.

between schools, and even inconsistent between teachers within the same school.¹⁴⁶

There is enormous variability across schools, and even with the SLPs, there is enormous variability in what each of the Specialist Learning Programs are doing... and there is limited coordination across schools in terms of getting them all on the same page.¹⁴⁷

Inconsistency creates inequity between schools, and even within schools

- 3.26 The Telethon Kids Institute told us that inconsistency creates inequity between different schools. This has led to certain schools that are known for their high-quality practices being inundated by families seeking to access them.¹⁴⁸ One parent told us of the inconsistency between schools:

This leaves parents in a position of trying to network to find what schools are likely to be supportive or which ones to avoid—to the point where people try to buy houses in ‘good catchment areas’. This should not be the case.¹⁴⁹

- 3.27 This inconsistency is also reflected in the fact that many autistic students change schools multiple times as their needs remain unmet.¹⁵⁰ Families reported moving between schools and systems (public, Catholic and independent), seeking better support after unsuccessful experiences.¹⁵¹

- 3.28 Inconsistency is even noted within the same school.¹⁵² Families reported variable experiences from year to year, or support declining after the departure of a skilled and understanding staff member.¹⁵³

- 3.29 Schools themselves may also struggle to cope with a high number of autistic students. The Western Australian Secondary School Executives Association said that:

... when a school has managed kids with autism very well, they get a reputation for that and then a whole bunch of other parents bring their kids there with autism. There becomes a saturation point where you can only cope with so many. That is another challenge in itself.¹⁵⁴

Finding 7

The implementation of evidence-based practices to support autistic students is highly inconsistent between schools and school systems, and within schools. This creates inequity and unnecessary challenges for students, families and schools.

146 Submission 30, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 6.

147 Professor Sonya Girdler, Curtin Autism Research Group, *Transcript of Evidence*, 29 March 2023, p. 11.

148 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 October 2023, p. 2.

149 Submission 7, Name withheld, p. 1.

150 Submission 38, Amaze, p. 2.

151 Submission 89, South West Autism Network, p. 27, 51; Submission 68, Name withheld, p. 1; Submission 8, Name withheld, p. 2.

152 Submission 78, Autism Association of Western Australia, pp. 3, 9.

153 Submission 52, Name withheld, p. 1-2; Submission 39, Kiind, p. 1.

154 Melissa Gillett, Western Australian Secondary School Executives Association, *Transcript of Evidence*, 18 October 2023, p. 7.

A strategic approach can create systemic change

- 3.30 Evidence to this inquiry has clearly demonstrated that many autistic students are inadequately supported at school, which causes harm and creates challenges for their families and schools. The remainder of this report examines these issues. An increase in autism prevalence without systemic change will exacerbate existing issues and lead to continued educational inequity and poor outcomes for autistic students.¹⁵⁵
- 3.31 Key stakeholders to the inquiry suggested that systemic change will only be possible with an overarching, cohesive strategy that addresses existing issues and guides schools on embedding evidence-based practice to support autistic students. Telethon Kids Institute said the development of such a strategy would be an important first step towards achieving the broader vision of truly inclusive schooling system for Western Australia.¹⁵⁶ The strategy should focus on improving the learning and wellbeing outcomes for autistic students by building inclusive school communities that welcome and value these students and their families.¹⁵⁷ Professor Whitehouse said that there was no ‘one size fits all’ program but a framework with parameters for good practice could be adopted by the education system and implemented by schools as appropriate to their context:¹⁵⁸

We are all working together as best we can, but I think what we really need is a clear strategy.

- Rebecca Wahlsten, Positive Partnerships

At the moment, we have ecosystems that are developing strategies independent of each other and, of course, schools need the flexibility to run their schools in the way that meets their community needs, but there must be a coordinated central strategy that actually drives that across the whole of the WA education system.¹⁵⁹

- 3.32 The Autism Association of Western Australia also said that the absence of an overarching framework for supporting autistic students was the most significant challenge across the education sector.¹⁶⁰ A framework would guide best practice on social and academic supports and shift the support model from a reactive one, where schools only respond when there is a crisis, to a proactive one:

... proactive is when the school does the training. They have all staff trained in autism. All staff are trained in understanding diverse learning needs, adapting the curriculum and developing an individual education plan. They all have a very positive framework in positive behaviour support. They see behaviour as a skill deficit, not as a problem child. They are proactively seeking support to continue the good work that they are doing. The student then starts on the first day, they have a

155 Submission 30, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 4.

156 *ibid.*, p. 6.

157 *ibid.*, p. 2.

158 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 March 2023, p. 8.

159 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 October 2023, p. 2.

160 Submission 78, Autism Association of Western Australia, p. 3.

positive outcome and, often, we see that those children have a lot better trajectory in the school environment because it started well from day one.¹⁶¹

3.33 Positive Partnerships were also supportive of a framework or strategy, and pointed to South Australia's Autism Inclusion Teacher initiative (see Box 6 in Chapter 5) as an example of positive, systematic change:

... having a strategy within education that is clear, that has a clear direction and clear purpose through the appointment of key staff, is just incredible. Because they are all part of a journey together... There is a clear pathway, and it is being managed really, really well and effectively.¹⁶²

3.34 We asked many witnesses to the inquiry whether an overarching framework such as an autism education strategy would provide consistency and accountability in the support that is provided to autistic students. There was general support for this proposal, although there was some reservation that an autism-specific strategy would exclude undiagnosed students, students across the full spectrum of autism presentations, or students with other disabilities.¹⁶³ Some were of the view that a broader neurodiversity strategy would be more inclusive and would capture a broader range of conditions, with autism still remaining as the primary category for focus.¹⁶⁴ It was highlighted again that neurodiversity-affirming approaches can also work to effectively support a broader range of students.¹⁶⁵

3.35 The Department of Education recognised the need for a disability action plan which, 'undoubtedly, should include students with autism.' Key elements would include:

'a first principles conversation about the notion of disability and inclusion at its highest level'
professional mastery for teachers and all education professionals in supporting diverse learners

enhancing support for differentiation, provision of curriculum supports and assessment practices for diverse learners

pathways for students with disability, from early childhood to post-school.¹⁶⁶

3.36 However, we are mindful of findings that generic disability strategies have proven ineffective at improving life outcomes for autistic people.¹⁶⁷

3.37 It is our view that a more targeted strategy is necessary. We are of the view that a neurodiversity education strategy would strike the right balance in supporting both autistic

161 Tasha Alach, Autism Association of Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 30 August 2023, p. 4.

162 Chris Champion, Positive Partnerships, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, p. 11.

163 Carrie Clark, Kiind, *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 September 2023, p. 8; Dr Sarah Bernard, Square Peg Round Whole, *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 September 2023, p. 10; Heidi Brandis, PDA Perth WA Parents Support Group, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, p. 11.

164 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 October 2023, p. 8.

165 Sarah Pillar, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 October 2023, p. 8.

166 Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 19.

167 Senate Select Committee on Autism, *Services, support and life outcomes for autistic Australians*, March 2022, p. ix.

students and students with similar challenges, given the applicability of neurodiversity-affirming strategies and approaches to a broad range of students.

- 3.38 The remainder of this report discusses challenges with current supports for autistic students at school because the evidence we received was in response to the terms of reference which focused on autism. However, we have become aware during the course of the inquiry that broadening the focus of any strategic approach to improving supports at school has the potential to positively impact a broader range of neurodiverse students and students with other disabilities.

Finding 8

A neurodiversity education strategy for Western Australia would drive systemic change to improve learning and wellbeing outcomes for autistic students, and others, and improve the capability of schools to support a broad range of students.

Box 3: Victorian Autism Education Strategy

The Victorian Government committed more than \$19 million over four years to deliver an Autism Education Strategy, which was launched in December 2020. The Strategy aims to address issues facing autistic students through six pillars supported by international best practice:

- promote and celebrate autism inclusion and diversity at the whole school level
- build the capability of school leaders and staff to meet the educational needs of autistic students
- involve the student, families, and experts in collaboratively planning for students' education
- support autistic students' health and wellbeing
- support autistic students' individual education needs
- strengthen accountability and transparency for students with disability.

The main initiative of the Strategy is the establishment of the Diverse Learners Hub, which is a centre of excellence that provides evidence-based advice, resources, and coaching, and supports the delivery of all six of the Strategy's areas of focus.

The Strategy forms part of Victoria's almost \$1.6 billion investment into broader Disability Inclusion reforms. The reforms include increased training around inclusive education, a strengths-based disability inclusion profile for each student, the introduction of a new tiered funding model, and the creation of new disability support roles and teams.

The Disability Inclusion reforms also include investment into improved school infrastructure for students with disability, and scholarships for university students to complete postgraduate degrees in topics such as inclusive education and learning difficulties.

The Victorian state budget has also delivered \$4.8 million in funding to train and integrate more therapy animals into government school communities to help support students with additional needs to engage at school.

Source: Government of Victoria, *Autism Education Strategy*, 11 July 2023, accessed 5 February 2024, <<https://www.schools.vic.gov.au/autism-education-strategy>>.

Key features would make a neurodiversity education strategy more effective

- 3.39 Support for a neurodiversity education strategy was dependent on the inclusion of some specific features.

Neurodiverse leadership and co-design

- 3.40 The development of any neurodiversity education strategy must be led and co-designed by autistic and neurodiverse individuals.¹⁶⁸ This is not only essential to the success of any strategy, but also reflects best practice.

... nothing about us without us. It is so important that we must be part of the process— otherwise it feels like it is being done to us, and it will not work.

Performance and accountability measures

- 3.41 Data collection to monitor performance against the strategy and embed accountability structures at school and department level was highlighted as the most critical feature of any potential neurodiversity education strategy.¹⁶⁹

- Katherine Browne, Positive Partnerships

We must have a government policy driven by data and not anecdote. Within schooling systems around Australia, we often see policy or at least internal operational guidance driven by anecdote. Collection of data and evolution of that strategy according to that data are critical.¹⁷⁰

- 3.42 A lack of performance indicators and measures has been cited as a weakness of the Victorian Autism Plan and Autism Education Strategy.¹⁷¹ The peak body for autism in Victoria, Amaze, advocated strongly for 'hard outcomes' to be included in the refresh of the Victorian Autism Plan. In relation to education, the two performance indicators most commonly spoken about by parents and autistic students who have gone through the system are informal and formal exclusion of autistic students, and autistic students completing year 12.¹⁷² The Victorian Department of Education acknowledged the challenges in data collection and performance measures for specific cohorts of students, including autistic students, and this is a focus of the current Disability Inclusion reforms.¹⁷³
- 3.43 Accountability and public reporting of educational equity measures are also discussed later in this report (see Chapter 7).

168 Submission 28, Dr Sarah Bernard, p. 8; Nick Avery, South West Autism Network, *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 September 2023, p. 8.

169 Chris Varney, I CAN Network, *Briefing*, 31 July 2023; Dr Cindy Smith and Dr Emily Pearce, *Furthering Autistic Children's Education and Schooling*, *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 September 2023, p. 13; Symone Wheatley-Hey, Dr Sarah Bernard and Tanya Cataldo, *Square Peg Round Whole*, *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 September 2023, p. 11.

170 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 October 2023, p. 2.

171 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 March 2023, p. 11.

172 Jim Mullan, Amaze, *Briefing*, 1 August 2023.

173 Stephen Fraser, Department of Education (Victoria), *Briefing*, 31 July 2023.

Support for implementation

- 3.44 The Telethon Kids Institute recommended this in the form of funding provided to schools, as ‘strategy without funding is not worth the paper it is written on.’¹⁷⁴ The Autism Association of Western Australia noted that ‘the problem with any policy is that unless principals are supported to implement that, it is just going to be sitting in an inbox.’¹⁷⁵ It attributed the fragmented implementation of other education policies, such as school-wide Positive Behaviour Support (PBS), to the lack of support for its rollout:

In the education department there was a policy two years ago that really did not encompass how to support children with disability. The framework was not clear for principals: “How do I address behaviour of concern and look at it from the model of that is a skill deficit and I also need to modify the environment? I need to teach the skills and modify the environment.” Because there was not a clear implementation framework through that policy, schools adopt their own approach to behaviour support.¹⁷⁶

- 3.45 Similarly, Reframing Autism noted that appropriate investment in implementation of any framework would avoid repetition of previous mistakes—for example, where programs such as PBS and Zones of Regulation were adopted and rolled out without proper training, resulting in implementation difficulties and fidelity issues.¹⁷⁷

Commitment to undertake further research

- 3.46 Western Australia autism experts called for a commitment to undertake further research to build an evidence base for new approaches to managing autism in schools, and a strong focus on the evaluation of changes implemented at school level.¹⁷⁸ Professor Sonya Girdler from the Curtin Autism Research Group said a lot of work remains to be done in translating autism research into practice in school contexts, through collaborations between universities and the education system. The work that has been completed to date—for example, the KONTAKT program (see Box 5 in Chapter 4)—has been funded by philanthropy and is only short-term.¹⁷⁹

We do not need a quick fix. We need a long-term solution with long-term infrastructure and long-term solutions. I think things like investing in collaborative centres between special education needs and disability research groups like [Curtin Autism Research Group], where we can actually work together over a longer period of time within a shared agenda about what their priorities are and how we can support them is what we need.¹⁸⁰

174 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 October 2023, p. 2.

175 Tasha Alach, Autism Association of Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 30 August 2023, p. 2.

176 Tasha Alach, Autism Association of Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 30 August 2023, p. 12.

177 Submission 62, Reframing Autism, p. 8.

178 Submission 30, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 2.

179 Professor Sonya Girdler, Curtin Autism Research Group, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 October 2023, p. 3.

180 *ibid.*, p. 12.

3.47 Professor Whitehouse said there was a ‘major opportunity’ for greater collaboration between research organisations and the Department of Education in innovating and promoting evidence-based practice.¹⁸¹

Without innovation, nothing is going to change, and that is where we are at now—where innovation is our only way through this.

Review and update the strategy periodically

3.48 This is to both monitor the effectiveness of the strategy against its performance indicators, and to ensure it incorporates new knowledge and evidence.¹⁸²

- Professor Andrew Whitehouse,
Telethon Kids Institute

Application across all education sectors

3.49 To effectively address fragmentation and inequity, any strategy should encompass all three WA education sectors—public, Catholic and independent schools.¹⁸³ The Department of Education and CEWA both agreed that this would be beneficial.¹⁸⁴

Recommendation 4

That the Minister for Education support the development of a cross-sector WA neurodiversity education strategy, led and co-designed by autistic and neurodiverse people, that focuses on improving learning and wellbeing outcomes for autistic and neurodiverse students at school.

The strategy should be funded for implementation and include the following elements:

- measurable performance indicators at school and system level
- a commitment to undertake further research on and evaluation of evidence-based practices to support autistic students at school
- periodic review.

3.50 The remainder of this report examines the challenges that autistic students, families and educators currently experience with supports at school. We anticipate that any neurodiversity education strategy would seek to address these challenges, although we have also made recommendations that should be pursued regardless. Other challenges may also be addressed as part of broader reforms arising from other relevant pieces of work, such as the Disability Royal Commission and Independent Review into the NDIS.

181 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 October 2023, p. 7.

182 Submission 30, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 2.

183 Tasha Alach, Autism Association of Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 30 August 2023, p. 3.

184 Paula Power, Catholic Education Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, p. 12;
Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 19.

Chapter 4

Understanding of autism and training

There is limited understanding of autism

- 4.1 One of the strongest themes in evidence to the inquiry was that inadequate support for autistic students at school is often a function of a lack of understanding of autism. Families told us that many of the challenges they experienced came down to schools not understanding or recognising autistic behaviour:

The staff at both of my daughters' schools ... have demonstrated limited understanding of autism and ADHD. This lack of understanding extends to key aspects such as 'masking' - the way autistic people often suppress their autistic traits to fit in with their peers - and the high levels of anxiety often associated with autism.¹⁸⁵

While the teaching staff have been understanding ... they are always quite surprised to hear of [my daughter's] recent autism diagnosis as her presentation is not how they understand autism.¹⁸⁶

... I still regularly had conversations with his classroom teachers where they would be perplexed when M would express frustration about other students not following game rules, and similar stereotypically autistic responses. I found that none of the teachers I engaged with had any real working knowledge of autism and how it can be expressed in children, nor were they aware of strategies to help M and other students with autism.¹⁸⁷

- 4.2 In particular, stakeholders noted there was particularly limited understanding of different presentations of autism, such as autism presentations in girls and Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) presentations.¹⁸⁸

- 4.3 One young autistic student described his experience:

Before I started getting the help I needed, I felt like my school wanted me to work infinitely hard on everything. For example, I was having lots of trouble understanding something and doing it right, and they would just tell me to try harder, when I was already trying really hard and didn't understand... this made me

I think the root of the problem can be just a lack of understanding of the needs and the way of being of neurodiverse people, who exist in the world quite differently from other people but sometimes have very similar needs as well.

- Carrie Clark, Kiind

185 Submission 14, Name withheld, p. 1.

186 Submission 69, Name withheld, p. 1.

187 Submission 68, Name withheld, p. 1.

188 Submission 72, Name withheld, p. 3; Submission 76, Name withheld, p. 1; Submission 82, Name withheld, p. 1; Steve Metlitzky, PDA Perth WA Parents Support Group, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, p. 9.

feel scared and like I could never get things right, and that I just wasn't right. Like there was something wrong with me.¹⁸⁹

Limited understanding of autism impacts the ability to make appropriate individual adjustments

4.4 This limited understanding of autism has also seen schools unable to create effective and tailored Individual Education Plans (IEPs). We were told that IEPs are often prepared as 'cookie cutter' documents, which are ineffective as not every autistic child requires the same adjustments:

People are writing these IEPs, and they go, "Autistic diagnosis, we will do A, B and C", instead of saying, "child with barriers". It is about identifying what the child is finding difficult as opposed to their diagnosis.¹⁹⁰

4.5 Autistic students often have an uneven profile of development demonstrating a mix of strengths and specific barriers to learning—for example, 'they might have year 7 maths in year 5, and they might have year 3 spelling, and it is very hard for teachers to understand that.'¹⁹¹ When this is not well understood, the curriculum may not be appropriately differentiated and an autistic student's strengths and learning needs may be overlooked.¹⁹²

4.6 The Autism Association of Western Australia noted that teachers frequently need support to apply the existing IEP tool, ABLESWA, to students with autism. It recommended the introduction of training for teachers to be able to develop effective IEPs, including how to develop a baseline profile of strengths and areas requiring support.¹⁹³ This difficulty was also reflected in the State School Teachers' Union of Western Australia's recent review of public education, which found that many teachers and school leaders are not being provided with adequate resources to develop and implement meaningful individually tailored plans for students with special educational and behavioural needs.¹⁹⁴

Limited understanding of autism can result in inappropriate and harmful practices

4.7 Lack of understanding can also contribute to inappropriate and harmful practices, such as refusal to allow adjustments, physical restraints, segregation and exclusion of autistic students.

... classroom teachers and EAs continue to ignore the guidance provided in plans, which escalates the already difficult situation. This stems from a lack of understanding of the issues faced by ASD students, and sometimes, an object refusal to follow such plans.¹⁹⁵

189 Submission 24, Name withheld, p. 1.

190 Closed evidence.

191 Tasha Alach, Autism Association of Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 30 August 2023, p. 13.

192 Submission 56, Autism Teaching Institute, p. 2.

193 Submission 78, Autism Association of Western Australia, p. 20.

194 State School Teachers' Union of Western Australia, *Facing the Facts: A review of Public Education in Western Australia*, Final Report October 2023, p. 44.

195 Submission 68, Name withheld, p. 1.

It was a six-year-old child being held to the ground by two teachers because they are applying the Team Teach framework because they are not looking at why that child is behaving that way.¹⁹⁶

Most upsetting was the lack of support and understanding from the different schools Sam attended—the judgement from uninformed teachers who said it was because of my anxious parenting or because I treated Sam like a baby, or the teacher who said at the beginning of the year that she would fix Sam and then spent the remainder of the year putting him at a desk on the landing outside of the classroom so he would not disrupt the class.¹⁹⁷

Finding 9

Limited understanding of autism is a key driver behind inadequate support for autistic students at school, including failing to recognise autism, ineffective individual education plans and inappropriate and harmful practices.

Recommendation 5

That the Minister for Education strengthen training and resources available for teachers and school leaders in relation to developing effective Individual Education Plans.

School staff at all levels need training to better understand autism and implement evidence-based practices

- 4.8 Professor Whitehouse called for the education system to embed evidence-based practice in supporting autistic students.¹⁹⁸ This requires a significant uplift in the education workforce’s understanding of autism and capability to meet the needs of autistic students. This can be achieved through coordinated, system-wide professional learning for school staff at all levels.
- 4.9 We are also aware that the Department of Education is exploring some compulsory professional learning for all WA teachers—namely, the NCCD *Disability Standards for Education e-learning*.¹⁹⁹ We support some degree of mandatory professional learning to ensure that all staff have at least a baseline level of understanding about their obligations to supports students with disability. However, there should also be a strategic approach towards building staff understanding of autism and neurodiversity, evidence-based approaches to supporting autistic students, and building practical skills.

196 Tasha Alach, Autism Association of Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 30 August 2023, p. 12.

197 Dr Emily Pearce, *Furthering Autistic Children’s Education and Schooling*, *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 September 2023, p. 2.

198 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 October 2023, p. 2.

199 Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, Letter, 28 November 2023, Attachment 3.

Universities are not adequately preparing graduate teachers to support autistic students

4.10 Stakeholders widely agreed that graduate teachers are not sufficiently trained to understand autism and provide effective support. Professor Girdler told us that this is because autism training seems to sit in the ‘special education’ bandwidth of teacher training, which is a one-year specialist training program, yet there is limited input into generic undergraduate programs.²⁰⁰ A disability social worker said:

Teachers I’ve spoken to, who graduated a few years ago, detailed that only one or two units in their whole course touched on special needs. But given the increasing rates of children impacted by autism attending mainstream schools, this needs to be addressed to build the confidence and capacity of teachers.²⁰¹

4.11 The Committee also heard that autism-related content and training in undergraduate teaching courses is outdated:

I realised that everything I learnt in uni was just stigma and stereotypes, and I had to learn everything about autism from scratch at that point, and I had only just done that teacher training ... It was outdated and stereotyped. It did not look anything like the reality of what autism is on a day-to-day basis.²⁰²

4.12 The Department of Education recognised this gap in pre-service teacher training. The Director General said that there is no requirement for graduate teachers seeking registration to have undertaken core content regarding autism or special educational needs more broadly. The Department advised that all five universities offer a third-year unit in inclusive education but this did not amount to a ‘robust undergraduate special needs program’. The Minister for Education and the Department had explicitly requested universities to change their core content to include a mandatory component relating to students with special needs, but this was expected to take some time.²⁰³

4.13 In 2023, Catholic Education Western Australia began offering extra professional learning content and on-the-ground support to early career teachers in relation to supporting students with disabilities. This was in recognition of the limited preparation they receive during their university education.²⁰⁴ The Department of Education agreed that better preparation may help to reduce burnout in early career teachers.²⁰⁵ It supports graduate teachers to enhance their classroom practice through an induction program which includes opt-in coaching and various modules. The graduate teacher team, in consultation with key stakeholders, is proposing an additional module to develop teachers’ knowledge and understanding of how to cater for students with diverse learning needs.²⁰⁶

200 Professor Sonya Girdler, Curtin Autism Research Group, *Transcript of Evidence*, 29 March 2023, p. 11.

201 Submission 47, Name withheld, p. 4.

202 Katherine Browne, Positive Partnerships, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, p. 10.

203 Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 4.

204 Paula Power, Catholic Education Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, p. 7.

205 Lisa Rodgers and James Bell, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 4.

206 Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, Letter, 6 March 2024, Attachment 1.

- 4.14 The Committee heard of a recent agreement with South Australian universities to implement a module package developed by the Autism CRC as part of the initial teacher education training program.²⁰⁷
- 4.15 Changes to the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) standards are also expected in response to the Disability Royal Commission’s recommendation to embed a human rights-based approach to inclusive education for students with disability across teachers’ careers.²⁰⁸ The Senate Select Committee on Autism’s 2022 report also recommended that the AITSL work with state and territory teacher regulatory authorities to:
- ensure all initial teacher education courses include at least two units on inclusive education, with a focus on the functional challenges experienced by autistic students, as well as evidence-based strategies for supporting autistic students in classrooms; and
 - incorporate autism understanding into professional development requirements tied to teacher registration.²⁰⁹
- 4.16 The Committee agrees that these recommendations should be progressed as a matter of urgency.

Finding 10

Graduate teachers in Western Australia are not well prepared to support autistic students at school because university course content on autism and inclusive education is inadequate and not mandatory.

Recommendation 6

That the Minister for Education continue to work with Western Australian universities to change their core content to include a mandatory component on inclusive education and supporting autistic students, and that universities be required to report on their progress at six-monthly intervals.

Recommendation 7

That the Minister for Education ensures that additional support, in the form of professional learning content and in-class modelling and coaching, is targeted towards early career teachers in relation to supporting autistic students.

Education assistants are expected to work outside their training and experience

- 4.17 Education assistants (EAs) play a critical role in supporting autistic students at school and many are highly experienced and well qualified. However, mainstream EAs without specialist training are being relied on to support autistic students and other students requiring

207 Chris Champion, Positive Partnerships, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, p. 9.

208 Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, *Executive Summary, Our vision for an inclusive Australia and Recommendations: Final Report*, Canberra, September 2023, p. 244; James Bell, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 4.

209 Senate Select Committee on Autism, *Services, support and life outcomes for autistic Australians*, March 2022, p. 251.

additional support. This is because it is increasingly common within mainstream classes to have students requiring additional support who are not funded for or provided with a Special Needs Education Assistant (SNEA). Aside from leaving EAs without the skills to effectively support students, this also creates an unsustainable workload.²¹⁰

4.18 We were also told that a general shortage of EAs has meant that schools are willing to employ people in these roles with no training or qualifications. One teacher told us:

There are EAs who have their cert III or cert IV. But, at the moment, people are so desperate they are sending out—there are emails going around saying, “If you know anybody who can work with children, can you please—we don’t have enough EAs.” It is a real conundrum. They are not attracting them.²¹¹

4.19 There is a particular shortage of qualified SNEAs in regional areas. Where teachers who relocate to a regional area may be eligible for reimbursement of costs and accommodation supports, this is not available to EAs.²¹² Mainstream EAs and SNEAs have both called for increased access to training.²¹³ In particular, stakeholders highlighted that it is important that EAs are trained on how to scaffold skills and develop independence in autistic students.²¹⁴

4.20 The Department of Education told us that ‘over time, there has been investment in building the capability of EAs.’²¹⁵ It was recently announced that grants would be available for pre-service teachers working in education support settings in public schools in 2024, to encourage them to finish their course and stay in education support settings.²¹⁶ However, it is clear that attracting and retaining suitably qualified EAs, and providing opportunities for training, must remain an ongoing priority.

Finding 11

A lack of suitably qualified education assistants, and an increase in the number of students requiring support, means that education assistants are often being required to work beyond their training and experience.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff need dedicated, culturally safe training

4.21 Positive Partnerships told us that it is the only service nationally that offers dedicated professional learning around neurodiversity for Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEOs). Their content is strongly evidence-based and culturally appropriate, as it is developed and delivered by Aboriginal people with lived experience of autism. Feedback from AIEOs is that they would benefit from further professional development in this area:

210 Submission 64, United Workers Union, p. 3.

211 Closed evidence.

212 Submission 80, Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association of Western Australia, p. 2.

213 Submission 64, United Workers Union, p. 7.

214 Tasha Alach, Autism Association of Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 30 August 2023, p. 13; Submission 32, Name withheld, p. 1.

215 Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 12.

216 Hon. Dr Tony Buti MLA, *New incentive for EAs to support children with unique learning needs*, media release, 8 February 2024.

One of the issues within this space is that some schools do culture very well and then some schools do autism very well, but at not many schools from the feedback that I have received at these workshops do the culture and autism meet.²¹⁷

4.22 There is also scope to involve AIEOs in the development of IEPs, in recognition of their knowledge and strong connection with Aboriginal families and their communities.²¹⁸

4.23 Local regional staff are also an important resource in areas where there is a lack of specialist expertise and therapy providers. The Autism Association of Western Australia also told us about their work in regional areas with the Department of Education’s KindiLink initiative for preschool children and their families. Resources were developed in five Aboriginal languages to support families and educators to identify autism. However, this was only funded as a one-off project.²¹⁹

Finding 12

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and support staff would benefit from further professional learning in relation to neurodiversity, to enhance the key role they play in connecting schools with Aboriginal families and communities.

Recommendation 8

That the Minister for Education ensure that funding is available for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to undertake dedicated, culturally safe professional learning in relation to supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander autistic students, particularly in regional areas.

Building expertise within School of Special Educational Needs: Disability should be an ongoing priority

4.24 Given that the School of Special Educational Needs: Disability (SSEN:D) remains the primary source of specialist support for schools in building their capability to support autistic students, it is vital that consultant teachers’ knowledge and skills are kept current. Some stakeholders within the education system noted that the skillset and services offered by SSEN:D have become ‘diluted’ through the departure of key staff, lack of skill in the remaining workforce, and an increase in demand for support. In-depth, contextual knowledge of different school settings and networks is reportedly lacking.²²⁰ We heard other evidence that SSEN:D support is ‘not making a difference’ at the ‘coalface of being in a classroom’. However, it was suggested that this is at least as much of a problem with resourcing as it is with expertise.²²¹

217 Adam Howie, Positive Partnerships, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, pp. 6-8.

218 *ibid.*, p. 8.

219 Tasha Alach, Autism Association of Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 30 August 2023, p. 5.

220 Submission 44, Name withheld, p. 3; Submission 77, Name withheld, p. 1.

221 Niel Smith, Western Australian Primary Principals’ Association, *Transcript of Evidence*, 18 October 2023, p. 2.

- 4.25 The Department of Education noted in its submission that a number of SSEN:D staff have completed or are engaged in postgraduate study, or are Certified Behaviour Analysts.²²² Scholarships for teachers and regional staff to undertake postgraduate study in inclusive education has been a key feature of the Victorian Autism Education Strategy, with 112 scholarships provided as of July 2023.²²³ We would support a similar initiative in Western Australia.

Recommendation 9

That the Minister for Education ensure that scholarship funding is made available for teachers to undertake postgraduate study in autism and inclusive education, to build workforce capability and increase access to expertise in supporting autistic students.

- 4.26 The case study of PDA professional development at SSEN:D (Box 4) highlights how quickly and effectively support can filter through to autistic students at school where targeted and specialist professional learning is delivered to consultant teachers.

Box 4: Case study: Positive impacts of PDA professional development at SSEN:D

The Committee heard from the Perth PDA Parents Support Group about the parent of an 8-year-old autistic boy with a Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) profile and ADHD. The family left one school after receiving insufficient support and chose a new school. After some further challenges at the new school, the Deputy Principal arranged for a consulting teacher from SSEN:D to visit the school, observe the child in his class, meet with teachers, and to suggest strategies for increasing the child's level of engagement.

Following the consultant visit, the school implemented various changes including:

- incorporating specific PDA strategies, such as humour, distraction, declarative language and adjusting demands
- adapting curriculum to the student's needs and special interests
- giving him sensory breaks and physical activity as needed
- increasing flexibility such as allowing him to wear ear defenders, sit on a wobble stool or under his desk, play with fidgets during class
- early transition planning for the new school year and high school.

Some of the strategies had benefits for other students, including introducing a baking class to incorporate maths and literacy skills for all special needs children in the school and creating a library games program for students who struggle in the playground at lunchtime.

The consulting teacher credited his understanding and success to a PDA professional development day run at SSEN:D by an external psychology and educational consultant, which also included input from a PDA parent, Heidi Brandis. The child's parent feels more positive about the future now due to the support offered by SSEN:D: 'it has changed everything for us.'

Source: PDA Perth WA Parents Support Group, Additional Information, 8 November 2023, p. 1-2.

School leaders need training on inclusive practices

- 4.27 Active engagement of school leaders is essential to establishing inclusive school culture.²²⁴ Inclusion must be led by school leadership to 'unpack' what it means for staff, families,

222 Submission 87, Department of Education, p. 8.

223 Stephen Fraser, Department of Education (Victoria), *Briefing*, 31 July 2023.

224 Submission 78, Autism Association of Western Australia, p. 11.

teachers and students, and encourage a consistent approach throughout the school.²²⁵ Implementation of effective school programs for autistic students also depends on the capacity of school leaders and staff to navigate the implementation of evidence-based practices within the context of a complex school culture and environment.²²⁶

You really need to have leadership understanding and embracing and demonstrating and being a role model for inclusivity.

- Chris Champion, Positive Partnerships

- 4.28 Research has found that many school principals lack the requisite knowledge and training to implement inclusive school policy and support autistic students and, as a result, become passive rather than active leaders of school-wide practice.²²⁷ School leaders need a deep understanding of evidence-based practices in order to lead their effective implementation within the complex dynamics of a school environment, and ongoing investment in improvement is required through channels such as professional development and coaching.²²⁸
- 4.29 The Department told us that it is beginning to look at a training requirement for principals, to ensure they are equipped to support autistic students and other students with special needs.²²⁹ In relation to this, the Western Australian Primary Principals' Association and the Western Australian Secondary School Executives Association held the view that school leaders have a 'very good understanding' of the requirements of the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* and 'the vast majority of principals would prioritise the needs of the kids with disabilities over those who do not have disabilities'. From their perspective, what proves challenging is the practicalities of implementing supports and balancing competing student interests within the school environment, particularly in the face of limited resourcing.²³⁰
- 4.30 The Department's framework for *Supporting the teaching and learning of students with disabilities and complex behaviour* identifies leadership as a focus area, noting 'we want school leaders to confidently observe legislative and policy obligations and to confidently guide their communities when teaching students with disability and complex behaviour.'²³¹ It lists several deliverables for developing professional learning and resources for school leaders, including in relation to establishing inclusive learning environments.²³²

Finding 13

School leaders are vital to building inclusive school cultures but they often lack the requisite knowledge and training.

225 Chris Champion, Positive Partnerships, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, p. 6.

226 Submission 78, Autism Association of Western Australia, p. 10.

227 *ibid.*, p. 11.

228 Australian Education Research Organisation, *Use of evidence-based practices in schools: a national snapshot*, December 2022 p. 21.

229 Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 4.

230 Niel Smith, Western Australian Primary Principals' Association, and Melissa Gillet, Western Australian Secondary School Executives Association, *Transcript of Evidence*, 18 October 2023, p. 9.

231 Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, Letter, 28 November 2023, Attachment 2.

232 *ibid.*, Attachment 3.

Finding 14

The Department of Education has identified that school leaders need further support to effectively build inclusive school cultures.

Recommendation 10

That the Minister for Education ensures that competence and completion of training in inclusive education is incorporated into the selection requirements for applicants seeking appointment as a school principal.

Recommendation 11

That the Minister for Education ensures that a program of ongoing professional learning in relation to evidence-based practices to support autistic students is available and targeted towards school principals.

Truly impactful professional learning requires both theoretical knowledge and practical application

4.31 We heard evidence that current professional learning offered by the Department of Education in relation to supporting autistic students provides only surface-level information, with little in the way of workable strategies to support staff in the classroom.²³³

4.32 While this level of learning may be useful for someone starting with little or no knowledge of autism, more intensive and practical methods of professional learning are required to build high-level skills in teaching staff and to ensure that evidence-based programs are implemented with fidelity. Effective models we heard about include:

- Positive Partnerships workshops, which use a facilitation method rather than presentation, and Delivery Team Members with lived experience of autism or who are qualified professionals with experience working with educators and families of autistic students. Positive Partnerships delivered training for South Australia’s Autism Inclusion Teachers in early 2023.²³⁴
- Victoria’s Autism Teaching Institute, which is funded with support from the Victorian Department of Education. It uses a ‘theory to practice’ model which incorporates tutorials and lectures, as well as supervised placement at Western Autistic School and observation and assessment of participants’ teaching in their own classrooms. While it acknowledged that this learning requires a significant commitment of time, independent reviews of their training programs found they had a sustained impact not only on teachers who completed the course, but also on their colleagues and schools.²³⁵

233 Submission 44, Name withheld, p. 3; Submission 77, Name withheld, p. 2.

234 Submission 44, Name withheld, p. 4; Chris Champion, Positive Partnerships, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, p. 9.

235 Submission 56, Autism Teaching Institute, pp. 3-4.

4.33 This is also the model advocated by Furthering Autistic Children’s Education and Schooling (FACES), who are working to open an autism-specific school which can operate as a ‘lab school’ for teachers to learn through practical experience, modelling and coaching:

Our mission is to be able to upskill teachers. Our mission is to be able to give the skills to teachers in mainstream environments—constructive, useful skills. A one-day seminar on what autism is about teaches them nothing.²³⁶

4.34 Feedback from the recent rollout of the KONTAKT program in Specialist Learning Programs (SLPs) also highlighted the benefits of practical training for teachers in supporting autistic students (see Box 5).

4.35 We acknowledge that this method of professional learning requires a significantly higher level of resourcing and time than other methods, such as e-learning. However, this investment is essential if the education workforce is to achieve the level of understanding and capability required to embed evidence-based practice and be truly effective in supporting autistic students.

Finding 15

School staff need both theoretical knowledge and practical training in order to effectively implement evidence-based practices to support autistic students.

Recommendation 12

That the Minister for Education invest in professional learning programs for educators that build both sound theoretical knowledge of evidence-based practices to support autistic students, as well as practical skills in implementing these practices.

236 Dr Emily Pearce, Furthering Autistic Children’s Education and Schooling (FACES), *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 September 2023, p. 6.

Box 5: KONTAKT program rollout in WA Specialist Learning Programs (SLPs)

KONTAKT is a clinical intervention for school-age autistic children and adolescents, using a group-based training method to support the development of social skills. Following a large research study undertaken by the Karolinska Institutet, the method is used across a number of regions in Sweden. KONTAKT has been further developed for use by school staff in an adapted version of the program called SKOLKONTAKT.

Professor Sonya Girdler at the Curtin Autism Research Group (CARG) described KONTAKT as ‘possibly the most evidence-based social skills training program in the world at the moment.’ CARG received philanthropic funding from the Stan Perron Charitable Foundation and Channel 7 Telethon Trust to progress Australian research on KONTAKT, including publication of the manuals in English and a feasibility study. The program was rolled out in the SLPs at Baldivis Secondary College and Coodanup College in late 2023. Feedback indicated that teachers were learning new methods that were very different to practices they had previously understood to be suitable for autistic students, and that teachers were benefiting from coaching by someone with specific expertise in autism. The Autism Association of Western Australia said:

These teachers had so much direct teaching about autism and about curriculum differentiation, but what was the turning point for them was being modelled it and having the opportunity to be coached by someone that has expertise in autism. I feel like that is a perfect example of translating research into practice. It is not just saying, “These are your online learning modules”, which there are so many of at SSEN:D; it is around we need to take this further.

Source: Tasha Alach, Autism Association of Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 30 August 2023, p. 12; Professor Sonya Girdler, Curtin Autism Research Group, *Transcript of Evidence*, 29 March 2023, p. 7.

Chapter 5

Building a culture of inclusion

5.1 The vision of a truly inclusive school system that safely and effectively supports the diverse needs of autistic students starts with setting a culture that nurtures this vision. This involves leaders and teachers being aware of the different needs of autistic students and creating school environments that maximise their opportunities.²³⁷

5.2 However, we heard numerous examples of students being excluded or disadvantaged as a result of their autism, including:

- gatekeeping enrolments, or ‘managing out’ autistic students²³⁸
- exclusion from events and activities, such as camps and excursions²³⁹
- inaccessible assessment techniques²⁴⁰
- exclusion of autistic students from gifted and talented or academic extension programs.²⁴¹

5.3 The negative impact of this exclusion on autistic students’ sense of self is severe:

The worst kind of inclusion is having a child in a mainstream environment but then excluding them from their peers. Sam’s only motivation to go to school was to be around the other kids, so by [excluding him, his teacher] destroyed this motivation, made him feel different and modelled for his peers that Sam was different. Who wants to be friends with the weird kid made to sit out on the landing or the kid so frustrated by being away from his peers that he protests in the only way he knows how?²⁴²

Whole-school approaches provide the best opportunity for creating inclusive culture

5.4 Stakeholders noted the benefits of a whole-school approach in creating an inclusive school culture and supporting autistic students. Positive Partnerships told us that their whole-school workshops are the ‘most powerful’ and ‘you do feel the shift in the room around inclusion’:²⁴³

From the whole school workshops, it creates a different culture in the school around what autism is and how it is looked at. I think that is probably one of the

237 Submission 30, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 5.

238 Submission 8, Name withheld, p. 2; Submission 55, Western Australian Primary Principals Association, p. 3.

239 Submission 6, Name withheld, p. 1; Submission 40, Square Peg Round Whole, p. 10.

240 Submission 90, Name withheld, p. 7.

241 Submission 15, Amanda Rogers, p. 1; Submission 39, Kiind, p. 2.

242 Dr Emily Pearce, *Furthering Autistic Children’s Education and Schooling, Transcript of Evidence*, 13 September 2023, p. 2.

243 Rebecca Wahlsten, *Positive Partnerships, Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, p. 6.

most important things that can be done in schools right now is to improve the culture and the inclusion so that it is not stigmatised anymore and the teachers that come to our workshops are often amazed by the inclusive language and the neuro-affirming way that we deliver the information. And that is not necessarily something they have ever encountered before in any previous PL or teacher training. That, I think, is the biggest difference.²⁴⁴

5.5 The Autism Association of Western Australia told us that a ‘school-wide autism competency approach’ is required to effectively support autistic students, through building an inclusive school culture in which evidence-based practices are embedded throughout the school.²⁴⁵ One key element to this is professional collaboration, which is a frequently identified factor supporting the use of evidence-based practices.²⁴⁶

5.6 The Western Australian Primary Principals’ Association (WAPPA) highlighted that opportunities for schools to come together as a whole group are already limited, and usually consumed by system requirements such as curriculum planning and school review.²⁴⁷ They advocate for an increase in the number of school development days to allow schools the ability to bring all staff members together for extended training and collaboration that can’t be achieved through regular staff or team meetings.²⁴⁸

5.7 While there are certainly benefits in bringing all staff together, alternative approaches can also encourage a whole-school approach to inclusivity, upskill staff and achieve consistency across school sites—for example, South Australia’s Autism Inclusion Teacher initiative (see Box 6).

Finding 16

A whole-school approach is key to building inclusive school culture and embedding evidence-based practice to support autistic students.

244 Katherine Browne, Positive Partnerships, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 November 2023, p. 4.

245 Submission 78, Autism Association of Western Australia, p. 8.

246 Australian Education Research Organisation, *Use of evidence-based practices in schools: a national snapshot*, December 2022 p. 21.

247 Niel Smith, Western Australian Primary Principals’ Association, *Transcript of Evidence*, 18 October 2023, p. 13.

248 Western Australian Primary Principals’ Association, *Supporting Students with Complex Needs: Position Paper*, July 2023, p. 16.

Box 6: South Australia's Autism Inclusion Teacher initiative

The South Australian Government has funded access to an Autism Inclusion Teacher (AIT) in every public primary school from the 2023 school year. \$28.8 million over three years will be provided for each primary school to release a teacher to the role once or twice a fortnight. Most of the AITs were already practising classroom teachers, while others are in key leadership roles at their school.

The focus of the AIT role is to build professional capability through formal learning, collaborative practices and resources provided by the Department for Education to influence the practice of other staff at their school. AITs are provided with two days of training by Positive Partnerships as part of their initial training.

The main goal of the AIT initiative is to create inclusive school culture and build capacity and knowledge in schools. The AIT provides support to their fellow educators on how best to support and educate students with autism, as well as driving improved practice relating to autism that works for their school.

The benefits of an AIT include an increased awareness of autism, upskilled staff, increased student engagement, establishment of regulation spaces, supported families, and consistency across the school site. It is expected the work of the AITs will influence how autistic children experience their learning.

Source: Submission 59, Government of South Australia, p. 2; Department for Education (South Australia), *Briefing*, 2 August 2023; Department for Education (South Australia), *Improving support for children and students with autism*, 8 September 2023, accessed 5 February 2024, <<https://www.education.sa.gov.au/parents-and-families/student-health-and-disability-support/improving-support-children-and-students-autism>>.

School leaders and schools are not specifically evaluated on inclusion

- 5.8 Since 2022, school principals undergo professional review, which is an ongoing self-reflection cycle with a scheduled validation and assurance process conducted by a review team.²⁴⁹ Additionally, public school review occurs on a three-year cycle, where schools reflect on their performance against various domains and provide evidence, which is then assessed by a review team and reported.²⁵⁰ However, the Autism Association of Western Australia told us that these processes are overly focused on academic achievement and NAPLAN results: 'principals and leaders in schools are reinforced and being told they are doing a great job based on the academic performance of mainstream students.'²⁵¹
- 5.9 WAPPA and the Western Australian Secondary School Executives Association said that inclusivity forms part of the conversations in the review processes and 'if it was handled really badly, it would come through.'²⁵² However, inclusion is not necessarily acknowledged or celebrated, nor are the difficulties and challenges of inclusion factored into assessment of academic data:

Yes, we are always held to account for what your academic data is doing and we might then talk separately about what is happening with inclusivity and support for students and so on, but we rarely make the link to say that could impact your data

249 Department of Education, *Annual Report 2022-23*, p. 40.

250 Office of the Auditor General, *Effectiveness of Public School Reviews*, May 2023, p. 4.

251 Tasha Alach, Autism Association of Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 30 August 2023, p. 4.

252 Melissa Gillett, Western Australian Secondary School Executives Association, *Transcript of Evidence*, 18 October 2023, p. 9.

and is impacting your data and acknowledging that you are doing a great job across both of them.²⁵³

- 5.10 The Department told us that inclusion is not a specific performance measure in the review processes, although it should be assessed through the existing performance domains such as ‘learning environment’ and ‘relationships and partnerships’. In particular, assessment of ‘student achievement and progress’ should have ‘a particular eye on equity cohorts’ such as students with disability and Aboriginal students.²⁵⁴

Finding 17

Western Australian public schools and principals are not specifically prompted to evaluate inclusivity as part of any formal review processes.

- 5.11 Regarding the review process, Mark Utley, Principal of Coodanup College, noted that ‘there is a really big push in terms of moral purpose, you are held accountable to what you do for your students and also for your school, and that is a big questioning line about how you are catering for the students in your school’.²⁵⁵ In his school, they had established their own datasets to measure their inclusion success, including that nearly all students who go through the Specialist Learning Program transition back into Year 11 and 12 and most come out with a WA Certificate of Education.²⁵⁶
- 5.12 We are of the view that further, more specific guidance should be given to schools for self-reflection and assessment of a broader range of indicators of inclusion. Swedish researchers developed the INCLUSIO tool, an organisational inclusion assessment tool to help schools systematically map a range of support needs at individual and school levels (see Box 7). The Queensland Department of Education also developed the Queensland School Autism Reflection Tool, which supports school leaders to reflect, plan, implement and review processes that support autistic students.²⁵⁷

Recommendation 13

That the Minister for Education ensure that tools and resources are developed and made available to school leaders and schools to comprehensively assess the inclusivity of their school culture for autistic students.

253 Niel Smith, Western Australian Primary Principals’ Association, *Transcript of Evidence*, 18 October 2023, p. 9.

254 Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 5.

255 Mark Utley, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 5.

256 *ibid.*, p. 6.

257 Department of Education (Queensland), *Queensland School Autism Reflection Tool*, accessed 25 January 2024, <<https://autismhub.education.qld.gov.au/>>.

Box 7: INCLUSIO tool

INCLUSIO was developed as a tool for assessing inclusion for students with neurodevelopmental disorders (NDD) at school. The organisational tool uses interviews and surveys that enable school staff to map how well schools function for students with NDD.

INCLUSIO captures areas including:

- assessment of support needs
- use of individualised support
- implementation of a structured learning environment
- cooperation with parents
- staff education and professionalism.

The tool supports analysis and planning to improve the school environment for students with NDD, particularly with respect to improving inclusion. The use of INCLUSIO can also improve schooling for other students who don't have NDD.

The Center of Neurodevelopmental Disorders at Karolinska Institutet produced a 2018 report about inclusion for children and adolescents in Swedish schools, which is based on INCLUSIO being used to survey 4,778 staff members across 68 schools. The report found that across the surveyed schools, areas with particular deficiencies in how schools support students with NDD included:

- teacher training and NDD-specific knowledge
- efforts to apply individual-based support efforts
- consideration of students' peer relationships.

Source: Professor Sonya Girdler, Curtin Autism Research Group, *Transcript of Evidence*, 29 March 2023, p. 9.; Professor Sven Bölte, Curtin University Autism Research Group, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 October 2023, p. 4.

Gaps exist in educational options for autistic students

5.13 Parents reported there is a gap in options for students with strong academic capacity but high-level behavioural needs.²⁵⁸

These kids have the ability to be scientists, to be all sorts of amazing things and contribute amazing things but if their behaviours in a classroom excludes them and then they are being put in an ed support unit where the academic teaching is at a very base level, that is the end of that child's long-term career.²⁵⁹

... our son attends a specialised government school that provides excellent support and assistance for his needs, including emotional regulation and sensory challenges. However, we are concerned that the school might not be able to challenge him intellectually due to his high level of intelligence.²⁶⁰

Our amazingly talented boy is falling through the cracks. He is bouncing around like a football between places with none of them meeting all his needs.²⁶¹

258 Submission 20, Name withheld, p. 10; Submission 88, Name withheld, p. 3.

259 Dr Emily Pearce, Furthering Autistic Children's Education and Schooling, *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 September 2023, p. 10.

260 Submission 91, Name withheld, p. 1.

261 Submission 6, Name withheld, p. 2.

- 5.14 Filling this gap was the reason for the creation of Specialist Learning Programs (SLPs).²⁶² However, WAPPA agreed that they do not completely fill the gap:

It is quite a unique scenario where our most needy autistic students seem to be too complex to be placed into those settings... The frustrating thing is that they then end up in the environment that is least conducive to their learning... They may be very successful centres, but they are still ultimately leaving a lot of our most complex students with the most complex needs in mainstream settings.²⁶³

- 5.15 The Department of Education should consider whether the eligibility criteria for SLPs could be expanded as the availability of these programs also expands.

Finding 18

Specialist Learning Programs only meet some of the demand for educational settings for autistic students with strong academic capacity but high-level behavioural needs.

Transitions need early planning and extra support

- 5.16 Difficulty with transition can be a feature of autism and key times of transition within the education system warrant additional supports for autistic students.²⁶⁴ These transitions include commencing school, transition to year 1, transition to high school, and leaving school. Families reported feeling stressed about transitions. In particular, there is a lack of guidance about suitable placements for autistic students as they transition to secondary school, especially for students with complex needs.²⁶⁵
- 5.17 The Department of Education said that schools should capture a student's needs around transitions in any targeted planning. However, it acknowledged that case management can vary between schools and it was seeking to build quality of practice in this regard across the system. We heard that Coodanup College pays special attention to transition points, allowing for extra transition days before school commences for students with special needs to visit and familiarise. The school also invests in a full-time transition coordinator who works with feeder primary schools to share information about students and prepare for the transition. The school has found that this preparation is valuable: 'we find that if we do the work there, we are going to have less dysregulation and happy kids through.'²⁶⁶
- 5.18 In 2021, the School of Special Educational Needs: Disability also became aware of challenges schools were experiencing supporting autistic students at transition points. It engaged with students and families through the SLPs and developed professional learning which includes conceptual knowledge around transition as well as tools and templates for schools to plan and track transitions at a range of ages.²⁶⁷ The Department of Education also recently

262 Stuart Percival, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 18.

263 Niel Smith, Western Australian Primary Principals' Association, *Transcript of Evidence*, 18 October 2023, p. 3.

264 Submission 85, Department of Health, p. 6.

265 Submission 13, Name withheld, p. 1; Submission 14, Name withheld, p. 1; Submission 20, Name withheld, p. 12.

266 Mark Utley, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, pp. 16-17.

267 Joanna Hall, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 17.

engaged the UWA Centre for Social Impact to conduct consultations with students with disabilities and their families around a variety of issues, including:

what does inclusion look like; what is a neurodiverse friendly school; and... what does effective transition look like? Because when a student transitions, their mums, their dads, their everybody transitions at the same time.²⁶⁸

- 5.19 These responses are encouraging. However, there is further scope to strengthen transition supports for autistic students into secondary school, particularly in the provision of advice and planning for students with complex needs.

Finding 19

There is further scope to strengthen transition supports for autistic students into secondary school through case management, planning and advice, particularly in relation to students with complex needs.

Flexible arrangements maximise autistic students' opportunities to participate in education

- 5.20 Schools that successfully support autistic students have elements of flexibility of practice.²⁶⁹ Many submitters to the inquiry advocated that greater flexibility in relation to things like attendance, assessments and subject loads, as well as general classroom practices, would support autistic children to participate and remain engaged at school.²⁷⁰
- 5.21 In some cases, lack of flexibility may be due to lack of understanding around the benefits and evidence-base of some practices that support autistic students. However, stakeholders said that flexibility also requires a cultural shift:

For example, autistic learners who benefit from less seated classroom time and regular movement opportunities, may still be required to spend extended time sitting, even when their learning goals could be completed equally well if given the opportunity to stand and move while learning. A cultural shift in WA schools to align with the social model of disability and modern neurodiversity-affirming standards could create significant opportunities for greater acceptance and accommodation of autistic individuals, facilitating their fuller inclusion and educational access.²⁷¹

- 5.22 Heidi Brandis, Founder of the PDA Perth WA Parents Support Group, told us that schools' reluctance to offer flexible arrangements for autistic students is an attitudinal issue:

... the key thing is flexibility and current lack thereof. If there is a flexible approach to schooling our children, that is what works—flexibility in which subjects they

268 Stuart Percival, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 17.

269 Submission 78, Autism Association of Western Australia, p. 8.

270 Submission 8, Name withheld, p. 2; Submission 23, Name withheld, p. 2; Submission 73, Name withheld, p. 1; Submission 76, Name withheld, p. 1; Dr Emily Pearce, Furthering Autistic Childrens Education and Schooling (FACES), *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 September 2023, p. 2.

271 Submission 30, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 5.

attend, how many hours they attend, which days of the week they attend, how much support is provided. From my perspective and history of speaking to so many parents, it is an attitudinal issue far more than anything else, and a willingness to be flexible and to learn that maybe kids might be better supported in different ways.²⁷²

5.23 Families also reported that schools are unwilling to provide accommodations for autistic students because ‘it wouldn’t be fair to other children’, which reflected a lack of understanding about equitable access to education.²⁷³

Inclusion is not a zero-sum game... facilitating accommodations to allow disabled students to be engaged participants in their education is not taking away from non-disabled students. In fact, it is adding value for everyone...

5.24 We also heard that, in addition to attitudinal barriers, schools were often unsure whether departmental policies allowed for certain flexible arrangements for autistic students.²⁷⁴

5.25 In response to the issue of parents resorting to homeschooling because their autistic children were not supported at school, the Department of Education recognised that ‘parents and children are voting with their feet’ and greater flexibility may allow for some students to remain engaged in education:

*- Helen Pedersen, PDA Perth WA
Parents Support Group*

... there is an opportunity for us to have a conversation about how do we engage students in education that might not necessarily see them turning up at set times inside the school gate? ... I think the opportunity in this is to make sure that we are able to service students in a way that sees them engaged in education and continuing in education. That is a long way off from where we are today, but I do think that that is actually the conversation we need to have about what contemporary education looks like.²⁷⁵

5.26 While this acknowledges a need for greater flexibility, at least in relation to attendance, the Department’s proposal in this regard is clearly a longer-term priority. In the meantime, there would be value in clarifying the extent of the authority of schools to permit flexible attendance arrangements. We are also aware that Victoria provides opportunities for families who homeschool their children to seek a partial enrolment at their local government school so their children can access particular subjects or activities at school.²⁷⁶ There is no similar arrangement in Western Australia, as there is no provision for a part-time enrolment under the provisions of the *School Education Act 1999* or the *Enrolment in Public Schools* policy or procedures.²⁷⁷ This may be something to be considered as part of the Minister’s current review of the *School Education Act 1999*.

272 Heidi Brandis, PDA Perth WA Parents Support Group, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, p. 9.

273 Submission 45, PDA Perth WA Parents Support Group, p. 12.

274 Helen Pedersen, PDA Perth WA Parents Support Group, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, p. 9.

275 Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 18.

276 Department of Health and Human Services (Victoria), *Victorian autism plan*, December 2019, p. 34.

277 Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, Letter, 6 March 2024, Attachment 1.

Finding 20

Flexible arrangements for autistic students can allow them to remain engaged in education. However, many schools are unwilling to consider these arrangements, or are unclear on the extent of their authority to approve them.

Recommendation 14

That the Minister for Education provide clarification and guidance for schools on their authority to approve flexible attendance and subject loads for autistic students who require it.

Celebrating inclusion and diversity promotes understanding and reduces stigma

- 5.27 The attitude and awareness of peers is vital in facilitating acceptance of autistic students at school.²⁷⁸ Education about autism can improve these attitudes, as well as programs that support positive autistic identity and reduce stigmatising beliefs and attitudes about autism.²⁷⁹
- 5.28 The Victorian Autism Education Strategy has as its first strategic pillar: ‘promote and celebrate autism inclusion and diversity at the whole school level.’ This is to be achieved by:
- helping school leaders and teachers create inclusive and welcoming environments for autistic students, and
 - supporting school communities to increase their knowledge of, and appreciation for, autism.²⁸⁰
- 5.29 Supporting this strategic pillar is the Disability Friendly Schools initiative, which provides resources to prevent and respond to bullying of students with disabilities. Examples include lunchtime clubs and the I CAN Network, which provides targeted mentoring and support for autistic students (see Box 8).
- 5.30 Other initiatives such as inviting autistic guest speakers to share their lived experience, and celebrating events such as Neurodiversity Week, World Autism Day and International Day of People with Disability, can also drive positive cultural change towards inclusion.

278 Liz Pellicano, Sven Bölte and Aubyn Stahmer, ‘The current illusion of educational inclusion’, *Autism*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2018, p. 386.

279 Submission 28, Dr Sarah Bernard, p. 3; Tasha Alach, Autism Association of Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 30 August 2023, p. 3.

280 Department of Education (Victoria), *Autism Education Strategy*, accessed 25 January 2023, <<https://www.schools.vic.gov.au/>>.

Box 8: I CAN Network

The ICAN Network is a Victorian based autistic-led social enterprise aiming to celebrate and embrace autism by demonstrating the capabilities and achievements of autistic people. The Network delivers peer mentoring programs for young autistic people aged 7-22 both in schools and online. Of its 106 staff, 82 are autistic. The aim of the programs is to improve autistic students' social connections, self-esteem, and skills so that they are more likely to stay in school and complete their education.

The Network conducts internal evaluations to assess the social impact of its programs. It has seen the following positive outcomes for autistic students in boosting confidence and positive identity in the face-to-face school program:

- A 16% increase in mentees' self confidence
- An 18% increase in mentees' social connection
- An 8% increase in mentees feeling positive about being autistic.

The online program resulted in similar positive impacts:

- An 18% increase in mentees' social connection
- A 13% increase in mentees' communication skills
- An 11% increase in mentees' self acceptance.

The Network also delivers professional development programs that cater to teaching and school staff to encourage them to develop classrooms and environments supportive of autistic students' strengths and needs, to increase engagement. These programs have also received extremely positive feedback and outcomes, with 92% of Victorian participants feeling they could better support autistic students.

Source: Submission 41, I CAN Network, pp. 1, 3; I CAN Network, *Social Impact Report*, 2023, p. 7.

5.31 The Department of Education recognises excellence in disability and inclusion in its annual Education Awards. Outside this, it is unclear to us how the Department explicitly and publicly promotes the benefits of inclusion and encourages school communities to celebrate diversity. A visible focus on this would both highlight to school communities that inclusion is a priority, and contribute to reducing stigma.

Finding 21

Promoting and celebrating autism inclusion and diversity in school communities is an important factor in driving cultural change, increasing understanding of autism and reducing stigma.

Recommendation 15

That the Minister for Education ensures that the Department of Education develops further ways to promote the benefits of inclusion and encourage school communities to celebrate diversity.

Chapter 6

School resourcing and funding

Limited resourcing impedes evidence-based practice

- 6.1 Educational adjustments allow autistic students to participate in education on the same basis as their peers, as is required by the *Disability Standards for Education 2005*. However, we heard that limited resourcing affects the ability of schools to implement adequate adjustments to support autistic students.²⁸¹ Stakeholders highlighted some of the ways in which limited resourcing impedes supports for autistic students.

Schools are forced to make sacrifices

- 6.2 The WA Primary Principals' Association told us that the ability of schools to make adjustments for autistic students is often limited by resources:

Everyone has the best of intentions and everyone can make reasonable adjustments, but the adjustments soon change when you add in that they must be applied within the confines of a standard classroom with 30 other children and with the resources made available to you.²⁸²

- 6.3 The current level of resourcing requires school leaders to make sacrifices to what would be considered best practice—for example:
- placing multiple students with complex needs in the same class, with their support time combined to ensure a full-time education assistant (EA)²⁸³
 - prioritising EA support time during core subjects at the expense of specialist classes such as physical education, music and art, assemblies and school excursions²⁸⁴
 - leaving autistic students unsupported during recess and lunch breaks, when support is needed to help them develop social skills and peer friendships.²⁸⁵

Families are forced towards education support settings

- 6.4 The higher level of resources provided in education support settings is one reason some families choose a segregated education support setting for their child, even though most would prefer a mainstream environment.²⁸⁶ However, advocacy group Square Peg Round Whole pointed out that the 'choice' between an unsupported mainstream setting and a supported segregated setting does not represent a genuine choice.²⁸⁷

281 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 March 2023, p. 4.

282 Niel Smith, Western Australian Primary Principals' Association, *Transcript of Evidence*, 18 October 2023, p. 8.

283 Submission 55, Western Australian Primary Principals' Association, p. 5.

284 *ibid.*, Submission 12, Name withheld, p. 1.

285 Submission 78, Autism Association of Western Australia, p. 21.

286 Renée Darbyshir, Kiind, *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 September 2023, p. 5.

287 Symone Wheatley-Hey, Square Peg Round Whole, *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 September 2023, p. 6.

- 6.5 Kiind, a peer-support organisation for families caring for children with disability and complex health conditions, summarised this situation as follows:

Segregated special education schools have been gradually reduced while mainstream education is favoured, however the resources allocated to special education have not been carried over into mainstream environments. The misguided belief that inclusive mainstream education would be possible without the additional resources that special education settings provided has created strain in the system and frustration for educators and parents alike. On the other hand, Education Support classrooms have fewer students with more supports, enabling teachers to provide individualised teaching and learning for all students.²⁸⁸

- 6.6 Higher levels of resourcing may also be a reason for schools suggesting that autistic students would be better placed in a segregated specialist setting, even though this may not be the family's preference.²⁸⁹

Most parents we speak to, they do not want segregation. Where a segregated option works, it is because of the resourcing that is provided in that environment. Their preference is for inclusion.

- Renée Darbyshir, Kiind

- 6.7 Education support settings are also under resourcing strain, with a significant increase in the complexity of student needs and rising demand, which means that most are now at capacity.²⁹⁰

Regional autistic students are disadvantaged

- 6.8 The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Western Australia (ICPA) told the Committee that boarding hostel facilities are not funded to support autistic students in the same way as schools:

Funding is not available to children with autism in residential boarding facilities to assist with adjustments and accommodations that should be made to allow them to access appropriate schooling ... Currently, the lack of assistance in this area is forcing families to leave their homes and businesses in rural and remote areas to move to where they can access education for their children.²⁹¹

- 6.9 School psychology visits in rural areas may be limited to one or two days each term, which means it can take many months to collate reports to support applications for extra resourcing or autism diagnosis.²⁹²

School infrastructure doesn't support neurodiverse learners

- 6.10 Many stakeholders noted that school environments are a 'sensory nightmare' for autistic students.²⁹³ Crowded, noisy classrooms are overwhelming; lighting, temperature and frequent transitions can all contribute to dysregulation. There are often no dedicated quiet

288 Submission 39, Kiind, p. 5.

289 Paula Power, Catholic Education Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, p. 8.

290 Submission 5, Western Australian Education Support Principals and Administrators Association, p. 2.

291 Submission 80, Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Western Australia, p. 3.

292 Jane Cunningham, Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 18 October 2023, p. 6.

293 Submission 89, South West Autism Network, p. 29.

spaces where students can take a break to prevent dysregulation and escalation, or staff available to supervise students who need to withdraw.²⁹⁴ Elopement is also a significant issue for autistic students and many schools do not have sufficient protections in place, such as fencing and barriers.²⁹⁵

- 6.11 Telethon Kids Institute noted that prioritising investment in built environments that support neurodiverse students is a practical, visible way to promote inclusion and influence cultural change.²⁹⁶

Box 9: Victorian investment in inclusive school infrastructure

In Victoria, the Inclusive Schools Fund supports small building projects to ensure that all students can fully participate in education—for example, outdoor sensory gardens and learning areas, specialist play and recreation equipment, and adapting indoor learning spaces to be more inclusive. Since 2015, 420 projects have been funded with a total investment of \$80 million.

Supported inclusion schools are also being built, which are designed with facilities to provide extra support to students with disability—for example, sensory areas, accessible play spaces, wider corridors and improved acoustics and lighting. The intention of this investment is to meet the needs of all students and allow more students with disability to attend their local mainstream school.

Source: Victorian School Building Authority, *Inclusive Schools Fund*, 19 December 2023, accessed 17 January 2023, <<https://www.schoolbuildings.vic.gov.au/>>; Victorian School Building Authority, *Supported inclusion schools*, 10 January 2024, accessed 17 January 2024, <<https://www.schoolbuildings.vic.gov.au/>>.

Teachers' time is a scarce resource

- 6.12 Time pressures on staff create a significant barrier to implementing evidence-based practices, both in general classroom teaching²⁹⁷ and in supporting autistic students.²⁹⁸ Many evidence-based practices are based on delivery of supports 1:1 or in small groups.²⁹⁹ Class sizes are large with increasing complexity and diversity of student needs, and teachers have limited DOTT (Duties Other Than Teaching) time to plan, build relationships and communicate with families and therapists.³⁰⁰ One very experienced teacher, who is also a parent to two autistic children, told us she is allocated just 15 minutes of DOTT time per hour of class and much of schools' success in supporting autistic students comes from staff putting in 'hundreds and hundreds' of unpaid hours.³⁰¹ Ultimately, this lack of resourcing and unmanageable workload can make teachers feel burdened by having an autistic student in their class.³⁰²

294 Submission 10, Rebecca Walker, p. 1.

295 Submission 30, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 6; Submission 80, Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Western Australia, p. 3.

296 Sarah Pillar, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 October 2023, p. 3.

297 Australian Education Research Organisation, *Use of evidence-based practices in schools: a national snapshot*, December 2022, p. 19.

298 Submission 39, Kiind, p. 10.

299 Submission 30, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 6.

300 Submission 39, Kiind, p. 20; Submission 40, Square Peg Round Whole, pp. 16-17; Submission 52, Name withheld, p. 3.

301 Closed evidence.

302 Submission 78, Autism Association of Western Australia, p. 10; Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 March 2023, p. 5.

- 6.13 We are aware that class size is a contested and enduring area of debate in education policy and it is beyond the scope of this inquiry to determine the issue. However, we note the recent State Schools Teachers' Union of WA report, *Facing the Facts*, which found that WA class sizes are too big to allow teachers to respond satisfactorily to the specific needs of each student, particularly with the increasing complexity of student needs.³⁰³
- 6.14 The Department noted current negotiations over class sizes and agreed that 'part of the issue is around teachers needing time and space to be able to do the work'. However, it noted the significant cost of reducing class sizes and questioned whether funds would be better invested in lifting staff capability and reducing 'red tape' for teachers so they can focus on classroom teaching. The Department also highlighted that there has been investment over time in building the capacity of education assistants and increasing DOTT time for teachers to do this work.³⁰⁴

Specialist Learning Program places are limited

- 6.15 Between 2016 and 2020, 16 Specialist Learning Programs (SLPs) were established, with funding announced in 2022 for expansion into a further eight schools into 2025.³⁰⁵ However, demand for admission to these programs is high:

... these programs are competitive to get into, are mostly located in outer metro areas, and there are not enough places available in the programs to meet demand. Preference is given to autistic students who live in the area and programs can be full before inviting applicants from out of area. There are far more autistic students in WA than places available in SLPs. Eligibility criteria are strict, and the application process is highly involved; this can be a barrier for many students and families.³⁰⁶

- 6.16 The Department of Education confirmed that as at 16 November 2023, there were 44 students waitlisted (assessed as eligible and suitable for placement) for primary SLPs and 40 students waitlisted for secondary SLPs.³⁰⁷

Demand for School of Special Educational Needs: Disability support outstrips its resources

- 6.17 The School of Special Education Needs: Disability (SSEN:D) is the core system resource for supporting autistic school students. It provides consultancy support to schools on request and provides research and evidence-based professional learning and resources to assist educators to meet the needs of students with disability.³⁰⁸
- 6.18 Stakeholders told us that schools can struggle to access SSEN:D consultant support due to limited capacity, particularly in regional and remote areas.³⁰⁹ Support is provided according

303 State School Teachers Union of Western Australia, *Facing the Facts: A Review of Public Education in Western Australia*, October 2023 p. 55.

304 Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 12.

305 Submission 87, Department of Education, p. 11.

306 Submission 39, Kiind, p. 3.

307 Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, Letter, 6 December 2023, Attachment 1.

308 Submission 87, Department of Education, pp. 8-9.

309 Submission 55, Western Australian Primary Principals Association, p. 3; Submission 80, Isolated Children's Parents' Association, p. 2; Submission 89, South West Autism Network, p. 19.

to a ‘prioritisation framework’, where the most vulnerable schools and students receive higher priority, and the skills of consultants are matched to the needs of the school.³¹⁰ However, we received evidence that wait times can still be significant.³¹¹ For some, this is a deterrent to requesting assistance at all.³¹²

- 6.19 The Department did not accept that SSEN:D resourcing was inadequate, with 85 FTE consultants, and pointed to their ability to assist schools to use their resources effectively and access other supports.³¹³ It said that waitlists can vary throughout the year, and that regional and remote schools should not be disadvantaged because the prioritisation only depended on need.³¹⁴
- 6.20 We were told that when support is provided, consultants are rarely able to participate in meaningful classroom observations, development and review of individual education plans or engagement with families.³¹⁵ One teacher highlighted that a one-off visit from a consultant may not alleviate pressures felt by teachers but may add to them, as suggestions following a brief observation then have to be implemented with little ongoing support.³¹⁶
- 6.21 The model is generally not resourced to provide intensive, ongoing support although this is provided for complex cases.³¹⁷ One parent, whose child had experienced extreme distress at school, was positive about the intensive assistance they received from SSEN:D yet still noted:
- From what we understand, [our child] had much, much, much more one-on-one contact and face time with the SSEN:D practitioner than was normal. I felt like we were being pushed to be, like, “Your kid needs less of this time.” Our kid needs what he needs. So there seemed to be time allocations and pressures on those groups that maybe were challenging for them.³¹⁸
- 6.22 Stakeholders advocated that better resourcing would also allow SSEN:D to fulfil a more proactive role. One teacher pointed to the Department-funded Geraldton Lighthouse model, a \$2.6 million project aimed at building capacity in all staff across a network of schools in evidence-based practices for supporting autism students. The Department of Education confirmed that this is a time-limited project approved until 30 June 2024, although SSEN:D and the Midwest Regional Education Office have provided further funding for six months to expand the reach of the model in the region to include up to 10 new schools.³¹⁹
- 6.23 By comparison, Catholic Education Western Australia’s (CEWA) Students with Disability Team has 18 consultants who manage a caseload of around 11 to 12 schools each. This

310 Joanna Hall, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 14.

311 Niel Smith, Western Australian Primary Principals Association, *Transcript of Evidence*, 18 October 2023, p. 2.

312 Mel Jacobson, South West Autism Network, *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 September 2023, pp. 5-6.

313 Joanna Hall, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 3.

314 *ibid.*, p. 14.

315 Submission 55, Western Australian Primary Principals Association, p. 3

316 Closed evidence.

317 Niel Smith, Western Australian Primary Principals Association, *Transcript of Evidence*, 18 October 2023, p. 2.

318 Closed evidence.

319 Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, Letter, 6 March 2024, Attachment 1.

allows continuity of support and building good relationships with school leaders, teachers and parents.³²⁰

There has been recent investment in additional system-level support

6.24 The Department’s framework for *Supporting the teaching and learning of students with disability and complex behaviour* includes allocation of \$2.26m to facilitate the employment of 16 FTE behaviour support coordinators who will work with schools to adopt multi-tiered systems of support and processes that support the engagement, wellbeing and achievement of students with disability.³²¹ These will be based in schools throughout the Department’s education regions, with each region to have input about how the model will work best in their region. A staged development program will begin either in late Term One or early Term Two 2024. The Department said that support will differ from that provided by SSEN:D’s consultants:

[SSEN:D] consulting teachers are more likely to work at an individual child or a cohort level about specific adjustments. This is about schools becoming “for all kids.” So schools having systems processes in those three areas [engagement, wellbeing and achievement] means that they automatically meet the needs of kids with disability.³²²

6.25 Provision of additional, proactive support through regional offices is a positive development. A ‘hub and spoke’ model balances centralised support from the Department’s disability and inclusion directorate with local, contextual knowledge in each region.

Finding 22

Resourcing to support autistic students, both at school and system level, has not kept pace with increasing prevalence and complexity of needs.

Finding 23

Inadequate resourcing limits the ability of schools to implement evidence-based practices to support autistic students.

Finding 24

The Department of Education is funding new FTE to help schools build multi-tiered systems of support for the engagement, wellbeing and achievement of students with disability.

The basis for supplementary funding needs review

6.26 Pursuant to the Student-Centred Funding Model (SCFM), WA public schools have flexibility to use their one-line budgets to engage supports and services, implement teaching and learning adjustments and create responsive staffing profiles that best meet the needs of

320 Paula Power, Catholic Education Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, p. 3.

321 Submission 87, Department of Education, p. 18.

322 Stuart Percival, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, pp. 15-16.

their students and school contexts.³²³ Additionally, schools receive supplementary funding to support students with disability through the Individual Disability Allocation (IDA) and the Educational Adjustment Allocation (EAA).

Linking Individual Disability Allocation funding to diagnosis creates barriers to access

6.27 The IDA is allocated to schools by application, with eligibility determined by criteria and evidence of diagnosis that align with the *National Guideline for the Assessment and Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorders*. An interim IDA is available for students who can provide evidence that they are waitlisted for autism assessment. The Department says that examining ways to streamline access to interim IDA funding is a priority, and it meets regularly with agency partners to consider alternative models to achieve this.³²⁴

6.28 Catholic schools also receive weighted per capita funding for students with disability, by application to the state government, with eligibility also determined by criteria and evidence of medical diagnosis. Schools have autonomy regarding use of that funding, although CEWA told us that public funding for students with disability falls short of need. Additional student with disability funding is available through Australian Government schools funding equity loadings and private income.³²⁵

6.29 We received evidence that this diagnostic or medical-based model of accessing support is problematic for a range of reasons, including:

- lengthy waitlists and expenses related to diagnosis³²⁶
- diagnosis doesn't always correlate with the level of support required—there can be hugely different support needs within the same diagnostic category, support needs fluctuate over time and in different settings³²⁷
- limited accessibility in regional and remote areas³²⁸
- personal, social and cultural factors which may mean diagnosis is never sought.³²⁹

... it is really important to note that diagnosis is a privilege... We cannot only be allocating the support that is needed to the children who are lucky enough to be on the top of that list and have gone through that process.

- Symone Wheatley-Hey, Square Peg Round Whole

6.30 The Department acknowledged the difficulties with the current funding model:

Diagnosis triggers funding. Not completely, but certainly that is a barrier, and we know there is an issue in terms of accessing diagnosis... regardless of diagnosis, we

323 Submission 87, Department of Education, p. 2.

324 Submission 87, Department of Education, p. 18.

325 Submission 16, Catholic Education Western Australia, p. 4.

326 For more discussion on the impact of excessive waiting times for assessment and treatment, see Select Committee into Child Development Services, *Child development services in Western Australia: Valuing our children and their needs*, Legislative Council, November 2023, p. 53.

327 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 October 2023, p.3; Submission 85, Department of Health, p. 6.

328 Submission 80, Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Western Australia, p. 2.

329 Submission 30, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 4; Submission 47, Name withheld, p. 2; Submission 85, Department of Health, p. 5.

need to be looking at students in regards to what their functional needs are, and responding to that in context.³³⁰

6.31 Numerous stakeholders have called for a shift to a needs-based model of individual disability funding.³³¹ This is supported by:

- the *National Guideline for the Assessment and Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorders*, which recommends that an individual's needs, rather than diagnosis, should determine their eligibility for needed supports³³²
- the Disability Royal Commission, which recommended that governments using a funding model based on category or medical diagnosis should, as a matter of urgency, transition to a strengths- and needs-based funding model.³³³

Finding 25

The Department of Education's current diagnosis-based model for Individual Disability Allocation funding creates barriers to access.

The Department of Education is shifting towards a needs-based funding model

6.32 The Department is progressing this shift by developing, trialling and validating a functional needs assessment tool as part of its \$4.58 million framework for *Supporting the teaching and learning of students with disability and complex behaviour* includes exploration of functional needs approaches to disability resource allocation, with a view to streamlining access to the IDA.³³⁴ In December 2022, the Department sought tenders for development of this tool. Tender documents recognised that the current disability resourcing checklist was no longer fit for purpose because:

- it had not been statistically validated
- its reliability for assessing functional need had not been confirmed
- it was 'open to potential misinterpretation or misuse by schools as it is subjective in both its completion and interpretation.'³³⁵

6.33 The Department advised that due to the history of unsuccessful tenders, it has developed a new approach which will include direct procurement from experienced vendors. Procurement will be undertaken in four processes, some to occur simultaneously:

330 Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 11.

331 Submission 55, Western Australian Primary Principals' Association, p. 4; Submission 85, Department of Health, p. 6; Submission 89, South West Autism Network, p. 29; Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 October 2023, p. 4.

332 Submission 30, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 3.

333 Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, *Final Report, Volume 7: Inclusive education, employment and housing, Part A*, September 2023, p. 273.

334 Submission 87, Department of Education, p. 18.

335 Bethany Hiatt, 'Education Department documents reveal disability assessment tool 'open to misuse' by WA public schools', *The West Australian* (web-based), 12 December 2022, accessed 31 October 2023, <<https://thewest.com.au/>>.

1. identify an existing functional needs-based methodology which the Department can adapt
2. adapt, trial and pilot the methodology in order to validate for the Department's purposes
3. develop an implementation strategy and resources
4. integrate the methodology into the Student-Centred Funding Model.³³⁶

In line with the Disability Royal Commission's recommendation, the Department must progress this work as a matter of urgency.

6.34 However the Department has indicated that, even with the development of a new assessment tool, diagnosis may remain as an element of funding allocation:

The degree to which we can remove all obligation to have a diagnosis is yet to be fully explored. Almost every system still has some sort of eligibility gateway that is based on a diagnosis or incorporates a diagnosis to gain higher levels of funding. We are not quite there yet, but what we are doing is developing an instrument that says, 'This is what a child needs; this is what that equates to in terms of dollars.'³³⁷

Finding 26

The Department of Education is progressing a shift towards a needs-based model of individual disability funding, although diagnosis may remain as an element of eligibility or allocation.

There are challenges associated with assessing a student's functional needs

6.35 In relation to assessing a child's individual support needs, Professor Whitehouse told us that:

... there is no one tool that will apply universally to all people with disability, and perhaps not even all children on the autism spectrum... there is an urgent need to develop a tool that can certainly support a greater number of needs. There are a variety of tools out there. None of them are perfect for any system...³³⁸

6.36 This possibly reflects the difficulty the Department has had in procuring a suitable, high quality assessment tool.

6.37 The Autism CRC recently announced it will develop an evidence-based framework for assessing, differentiating, and reporting children's functional strengths and support needs, as there is an identified gap in understanding and lack of consensus about how best to do this. It was intended to be delivered in the second half of 2024 and used across support settings.³³⁹ Any functional needs assessment tool developed and implemented by the Department for disability resource allocation should align with this framework.

336 Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, Letter, 6 March 2024, Attachment 1.

337 Stuart Percival, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 11.

338 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 October 2023, p. 4.

339 Autism CRC, *New framework will place people at the heart of decision making*, 1 December 2023, accessed 11 January 2023, <<https://www.autismcrc.com.au/>>.

- 6.38 Implementation of any future assessment tool must also be supported by appropriate resources and training. The South West Autism Network noted that their experience with National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) advocacy showed that a ‘very thorough’ understanding of disability is required to effectively assess an individual’s functional needs. Allied health professionals may be better qualified than teachers to undertake these assessments, although appropriately trained professionals are currently in short supply.³⁴⁰
- 6.39 The Victorian Department of Education emphasised the importance of high quality, student-centred planning for educational adjustments.³⁴¹ As part of Victoria’s Disability Inclusion Profile rollout (see Box 3 in Chapter 3), trained external facilitators work with families, schools and key people to identify students’ functional needs and adjustments through a strengths-based discussion and agree on the level of adjustment required.³⁴²
- 6.40 Care must also be taken to ensure that the funding application process does not become overly burdensome for families and schools. We received evidence that the current IDA application process is laborious and results are variable depending on the skills of the staff member completing the application.³⁴³
- 6.41 South Australia moved to a functional needs-based funding model for students with disability in 2019. Each school and preschool receives a flexible site grant, known as the Inclusive Education Support Program (IESP) Supplementary Level grant. For children who require more significant and ongoing adjustments based on their disability, schools and preschools can apply for targeted individualised resourcing, which is assessed by a centralised panel of experts, with the process being managed by the Department. The Department for Education has recently implemented the South Australian Government’s commitment to making access to support simpler through schools no longer needing to apply for supplementary levels of funding.³⁴⁴

Recommendation 16

That the Minister for Education ensures that the functional needs assessment tool being developed by the Department of Education is:

- aligned with the Autism CRC’s framework for assessing, differentiating and reporting children’s functional strengths and support needs
- implemented with appropriate resources and training support, and
- progressed as a matter of urgency.

The Educational Adjustment Allocation has been expanded

- 6.42 The EAA is another form of supplementary disability funding, provided automatically to mainstream schools in recognition of the need to support students with additional learning

340 Nick Avery, South West Autism Network, *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 September 2023, p. 6.

341 Sharon Barry, Department of Education (Victoria), *Briefing*, 31 July 2023.

342 Department of Education (Victoria), *Disability Inclusion Funding and Support*, 12 July 2023, accessed 12 January 2024, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/>>.

343 Submission 47, Name withheld, p. 3; Submission 77, Name withheld, p. 4.

344 Rhoni McFarlane, Department for Education (South Australia), *Briefing*, 2 August 2023.

needs who may not have a formal diagnosis or be eligible for IDA. It is based on the proportion of students in the lowest 10 per cent of NAPLAN results. From 2023, this has expanded to the lowest 15 per cent of NAPLAN results, providing an extra \$44.4 million to schools over five years ‘to support more students with additional learning needs in developing their literacy and numeracy skills.’³⁴⁵

6.43 The Western Australian Primary Principals’ Association (WAPPA) told the Committee that the EAA increase will attract a significant amount of funding for some schools but make no difference for others; the Western Australian Secondary School Executives Association (WASSEA) said the additional five per cent spread across 830 public schools ‘would not make a difference’ and, in a secondary setting, would be focused on literacy and numeracy rather than supporting complex needs.³⁴⁶

6.44 It appears to us that the intent of the EAA is unclear and that allocation of funding to support students with disability should be linked to a more relevant measure of disability rather than NAPLAN. A 2018 review of the SCFM found that there was limited evidence that the EAA targeted undiagnosed student disability—rather, it was more accurately a proxy indicator for social disadvantage. Further, schools raised concerns over the comprehensiveness and accuracy of NAPLAN as a measure. This was because students who are absent or withdrawn from the test—for example, due to anxiety or family dysfunction—are more likely to be in the bottom cohort but are not counted in the calculation of EAA.³⁴⁷ WAPPA and WASSEA also made this point and told us that ‘in some of our most needy schools, the students do not sit NAPLAN. They simply do not turn up. They are not being captured, so the funding they should receive does not come.’³⁴⁸

The Disability Royal Commission recommended that school disability funding should be aligned with the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability

6.45 The Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) is a record of all reasonable educational adjustments made by schools, across four levels of adjustment, to support students with disability. It is not linked to a category or medical diagnosis of a specific disability. Federal legislation requires that all schools report this data annually which then forms the basis of a loading provided for students with disability under the Schooling Resources Standard. Funding is transferred to state and territory education departments, Catholic school authorities and individual independent schools. Education departments and Catholic school authorities then use their own funding models to distribute

345 Niel Smith, Western Australian Primary Principals’ Association, *Transcript of Evidence*, 18 October 2023, p. 5; Submission 87, Department of Education, p. 2.

346 Niel Smith and Melissa Gillett, Western Australian Primary Principals’ Association and Western Australian Secondary School Executives Association, *Transcript of Evidence*, 18 October 2023, pp. 5-6.

347 Nous Group and the Centre for International Research on Education Systems, *Evaluation of the Student-Centred Funding Model*, Department of Education, Perth, August 2018, pp. 66-68.

348 Niel Smith, Western Australian Primary Principals’ Association, *Transcript of Evidence*, 18 October 2023, p. 6.

funding to individual schools; however, these models do not always align with the NCCD levels of adjustment.³⁴⁹

- 6.46 The Disability Royal Commission noted this can create funding gaps for students with disability, where a student requires adjustments at school but does not receive funding to support this. In addition to recommending an urgent transition to a strengths and needs-based disability funding model, the Disability Royal Commission also recommended that state governments ensure their targeted disability funding models align with the NCCD levels of adjustment.³⁵⁰
- 6.47 WAPPA told us that the distribution of NCCD funding to WA public schools is unclear and needs to be more transparent.³⁵¹ The Department responded that there is no direct connection between the NCCD, EAA and IDA and ‘if our principals actually thought it all the way through, they would not necessarily want it, because the state funds far more generously than what we actually receive from the NCCD.’³⁵²
- 6.48 The Department of Education’s evidence to the Disability Royal Commission was that when the SCFM was created, the Department originally wanted to align the EAA with the NCCD but it wasn’t felt that the data was reliable enough.³⁵³ A 2018 review of the SCFM reiterated these concerns, noting that NCCD data was more subjective and variable across the system, given that it is based on school assessment. Still, it recommended exploring NCCD data as an alternative option for assessing educational adjustment requirements.³⁵⁴
- 6.49 Aligning WA’s disability funding model for schools with the NCCD will also allow for comparative tracking both internally and with other jurisdictions to identify improvements and areas for focus.³⁵⁵ The Victorian Auditor General’s Office recently found that, by adopting the NCCD as the primary identifier for students with disability, the Victorian Department of Education had improved the quality of its data on student outcomes and inclusive education practices.³⁵⁶ Improving data quality is vital to improving transparency and accountability for disability-specific school funding, which has emerged as a strong theme in this inquiry, as well as the Disability Royal Commission and the NDIS review.

349 Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, *Final Report, Volume 7: Inclusive education, employment and housing, Part A*, September 2023, pp. 132-134.

350 Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, *Final Report, Volume 7: Inclusive education, employment and housing, Part A*, September 2023, Recommendation 7.12; pp. 269, 273-274.

351 Submission 55, Western Australian Primary Principals’ Association, p. 6; Niel Smith, Western Australian Primary Principals’ Association, *Transcript of Evidence*, 18 October 2023, p. 1.

352 Stuart Percival, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 11.

353 Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, Stuart Percival, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 June 2022, Public hearing 24, p. 236, [25].

354 Nous Group and the Centre for International Research on Education Systems, *Evaluation of the Student-Centred Funding Model*, Department of Education, Perth, August 2018, p. 65.

355 Submission 40, Square Peg Round Whole p. 16.

356 Victorian Auditor General’s Office, *Supporting Students with Disability*, Melbourne, June 2023, p. 25.

Recommendation 17

That the Minister for Education progress Recommendation 7.12 (c) of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, regarding adopting a strengths- and needs- based disability funding model that aligns with the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability.

Schools need autonomy to manage their budgets, but also need to be accountable for supporting autistic students

6.50 Many stakeholders to the inquiry expressed a desire for greater accountability and transparency around how school funding is used to benefit the specific student or cohort of students that attract that funding.³⁵⁷ Families can be quite stressed when they are unsure how much funding is available to support their child and there are barriers in accessing this information. There is limited line of sight between funding, expenditure, and student outcomes:

While the [Student Centred Funding Model] contains an allocation of funding for students with a disability, ... there is no regulation to ensure that the funding is employed effectively or for its intended purpose.³⁵⁸

6.51 Further, the common practice of sharing or redistributing funding can create gaps and mask a greater inadequacy of funding to meet the basic needs of students. It is an ‘open secret’ that the limited funding attracted by autistic students with less complex behaviours (for example, those who do not present risk of elopement or violent behaviour) is often redirected to support other students with complex behaviours or without diagnosis.³⁵⁹ This overlooks the needs of autistic students who may have equivalent need but are better able to ‘mask’, and can create a perverse outcome where families or schools may overstate a student’s needs or behaviours to secure greater resources for support.

6.52 The Department responded that schools are encouraged to look at their funding ‘as a whole’ and it is not the intent of the SCFM ‘to segregate allocation for particular students into particular buckets... that is an old way of thinking.’³⁶⁰ However, it also acknowledged that it is aware of ‘a degree of unspent, unallocated money’ in some schools.³⁶¹

Better communication supports transparency

6.53 However, it is our view that the issue is as much about communication of how funds are spent to meet the needs of autistic students. CEWA acknowledged the difficulty that some parents feel not knowing how much funding their child attracts:

357 Submission 63, Western Australian Council of State School Organisations, p. 3; Submission 64, United Workers Union, p. 4; Tasha Alach, Autism Association of Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 30 August 2023, p. 14.

358 State School Teachers’ Union of Western Australia, *Facing the Facts: A review of Public Education in Western Australia*, Final Report October 2023, p. 54.

359 Submission 23, Name withheld, p. 1.

360 Stuart Percival, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 12.

361 Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 12.

They see than an application has been put in and know that the school is receiving money, but what they do not know is that level of funding and, unfortunately, that level of funding is not as high as the parent would think it is.³⁶²

- 6.54 CEWA pointed to its Students with Disability Schools Support Program Guidelines, which provide information to schools about the range of ways they may consider using funding for students with disability, including teacher salaries, support personnel, curriculum development, monitoring and evaluation of education programs, professional development, access provision or assistive equipment.³⁶³ They also highlighted the importance of communicating to parents about ‘what support looks like’ because:

In their mind, it is mostly an education assistant. We would actually say that support is small group intervention by a teacher... there can be different ways that a school can support a student aside from an education assistant.³⁶⁴

- 6.55 The Western Australian Council of State School Organisations said that uncertainty on the distribution of allocations for children with additional education support needs is a common concern. It noted that transparency nurtures open and trusted partnerships between schools and parents, and supported parents’ requests to better understand how funding is allocated in their individual cases (while acknowledging that certain information, such as salaries, should remain confidential).³⁶⁵

Various reviews have called for public reporting on use of disability funding

- 6.56 The NDIS Review recommended that the needs-based disability loadings each school receives and the use of that funding to benefit students with disability should be reported publicly.³⁶⁶
- 6.57 The Disability Royal Commission noted that public reporting would demonstrate how all sources of funding for students with disability are being used and increase accountability. The Disability Royal Commission also referred to the Productivity Commission’s recent Review of the National School Reform Agreement, which found that the lack of publicly available data on school-level spending on students from priority equity cohorts gave little visibility over school-level actions to lift outcomes for these students.³⁶⁷ It recognised that any public reporting should not include a breakdown of support for individual students, to protect privacy. However, it ultimately recommended that state and territory education departments develop a methodology and reporting template to record the use of all sources

362 Paula Power, Catholic Education Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, p. 5.

363 Submission 16, Catholic Education Western Australia, p. 3.

364 Paula Power, Catholic Education Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, p. 5.

365 Submission 63, Western Australian Council of State School Organisations, p. 3.

366 Independent Review into the National Disability Insurance Scheme, *Working Together to deliver the NDIS: Final report*, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, October 2023, Action 2.5, p. 75.

367 Productivity Commission, *Review of the National School Reform Agreement*, December 2022, Finding 4.8, p. 39.

of school disability funding and publicly report on how the needs of students with disability are being met. This obligation should also be extended to non-government schools.³⁶⁸

6.58 These recommendations should be pursued. Although developing any reporting methodology will be complex, we are of the view that the benefits for accountability will outweigh the challenges.

Recommendation 18

That the Minister for Education progress Recommendation 7.12 (d) and (e) of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, regarding improving transparency on use of disability funding.

368 Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, *Final Report, Volume 7: Inclusive education, employment and housing, Part A*, September 2023, Recommendation 7.12; p. 274.

Chapter 7

Transparency and accountability

- 7.1 Parents expressed concern about the lack of transparency and accountability in schools, in terms of how legislative requirements are applied in relation to supporting their autistic child. The Committee heard that compliance with legislative and policy frameworks is not monitored or enforced:

Requesting accommodations, which of course are required by the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (Cth) and the *Disability Standards for Education*, is often met with resistance. Parents are not believed and so I now often bring Allied Health professionals to meetings with schools. Honestly, I'm sad to say that if nothing else, the Allied Health Professional is an independent witness and keeps the school's behaviour in check.³⁶⁹

Adjustments can be declined on the grounds they would cause unjustifiable hardship. However this can't be just the school unilaterally deciding the adjustment is inconvenient. The school needs to formally weigh up the risks and benefits to all affected parties in order to make the decision.³⁷⁰

Many policies and practices have not kept up with advances in autism research and understanding

- 7.2 Stakeholders to the inquiry said that there are educational policies and practices which have not kept up with the cultural shift towards modern, neurodiversity-affirming supports. We heard concerns about approaches used widely in schools that are, at best, inappropriate and ineffective, and at worst, punitive and harmful for autistic students. Some of these involved physical restraint and confinement. The Autism Association of Western Australia said:

We still see in many schools that we go into students are being locked in cupboards or they are being held to the ground by two staff, and that is because there is not an overarching framework for supporting students with challenging behaviour.³⁷¹

- 7.3 Many others are school-wide approaches towards behaviour management, such as Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) and systems based on reward and punishment. Autistic students may be punished for behaviour that occurs because of dysregulation, or behaviour which is an authentic expression of autistic processing, such as stimming, may be viewed as negative behaviour which needs to be managed. Conversely, rewards may be contingent on neuro-normative ideas of positive behaviour, such as sitting still and making eye contact, whereas this behaviour may be challenging for autistic students.³⁷² One parent told us that the

369 Closed evidence.

370 Submission 22, Name withheld, p. 4.

371 Tasha Alach, Autism Association of Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 30 August 2023, p. 3.

372 Submission 62, Reframing Autism, p. 2.

positive behaviour expectations at her child's school were 'totally unachievable' for autistic students:

Things like making eye contact, sitting still to listen (not fidgeting), playing in a group/cooperatively instead of playing alone, not needing help for organising your belongings. None of those things are part of being a good autistic person. [School-wide PBS] has destroyed my child's self-esteem about being autistic. It also creates a school culture where teachers and students see autistic traits as shameful and negative, leading to exclusion and bullying.³⁷³

- 7.4 We also heard from stakeholders about the negative impacts of Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) and Discrete Trial Training approaches used in schools, including special education, Early Intensive Intervention Programs and Specialist Learning Program settings.³⁷⁴ The use of ABA as an intervention for autistic students is highly contested. It is criticised as an outdated, compliance-based intervention which aims to change or mask autistic behaviours through repetition and provision or withholding of rewards.³⁷⁵ We did hear evidence that ABA is beneficial for some families.³⁷⁶ However, understanding of the research supporting these approaches has changed to recognise that the opinions of autistic people shouldn't be excluded in preference of the opinions of their families or others. There has been increasing focus on the detrimental impact of these approaches on autistic people's wellbeing and sense of self, which indicates they can no longer be considered evidence-based or neurodiversity-affirming.³⁷⁷ The Autism Association of Western Australia recommended that the Department of Education's application of ABA in relation to autistic students should be independently reviewed and evaluated.³⁷⁸
- 7.5 Stakeholders have called for these approaches to be replaced with other trauma-informed and neurodiversity-affirming approaches, such as Collaborative Proactive Solutions (CPS)³⁷⁹ and the interoception program that has been developed and implemented by Dr Emma Goodall and the South Australian Department of Education.³⁸⁰ Interoception is an internal sensory system in which the internal physical and emotional states of the body are noticed, recognised and responded to. It is a pre-requisite skill for self-management and regulation, and children and young people will struggle with their own emotions and social interactions if they have not developed interoception skills.³⁸¹

373 Submission 22, Name withheld, p. 3.

374 Tasha Alach, Autism Association of Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 30 August 2023, p. 10; Submission 17, Name withheld, p. 1; Submission 46, Name withheld, p. 1; Submission 52, Name withheld, p. 3; Submission 72, Name withheld, p. 4; Submission 86, Jodie Wilde, p. 1.

375 Submission 39, Kiind, p. 3; Submission 62, Reframing Autism, p. 3.

376 Carrie Clark, Kiind, *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 September 2023, p. 6; Submission 1, Name withheld, p. 1.

377 Submission 40, Square Peg Round Whole, p. 6.

378 Submission 78, Autism Association of Western Australia, p. 24.

379 Submission 21, Tanya Princi, p. 9; Submission 39, Kiind, p. 13; Submission 40, Square Peg Round Whole, p. 24.

380 Submission 22, Name withheld, p. 1; Submission 28, Dr Sarah Bernard, p. 7; Symone Wheatley-Hey, Square Peg Round Whole, *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 September 2023, p. 11.

381 Department for Education (South Australia), *Applying interoception skills in the classroom*, 2 May 2023, accessed 26 February 2024, <<https://www.education.sa.gov.au/>>.

- 7.6 In 2023, the New South Wales Department of Education committed to train its behavioural specialists in CPS ahead of possible implementation in schools as part of its enhanced student behaviour strategy.³⁸² The Association of Independent Schools of New South Wales also sponsored a school-based research project on implementing CPS for students with additional needs, which showed positive results including reduced suspension rates, positive shifts in teacher perspectives of student behaviour and increased student engagement in learning.³⁸³
- 7.7 In its submission to the inquiry, the Department of Education recognised that there are ‘different understandings’ of ABA, and noted that contemporary ABA practices should not be confused with older, traditional ABA approaches that incorporated the use of punishment. It said that schools may incorporate the principles of contemporary ABA to study and modify behaviour through consistent reinforcement, in a context that fully recognises that behaviour in students with disability may be a symptom or manifestation of their disability.³⁸⁴
- 7.8 It is beyond the scope or expertise of this inquiry to determine whether specific practices and approaches used or proposed for use in schools are, in fact, evidence-based. It is more squarely within our role to examine whether the Department of Education has appropriate structures in place to:
- be responsive to concerns raised by the autistic and autism communities, families and experts about the use of specific practices and approaches, and
 - ensure that practices and approaches promoted for use in schools are evidence-based and in line with current research and best practice.
- 7.9 However, given the body of evidence raising concerns about the application of ABA in WA schools, we believe that an independent review would be beneficial.

Finding 27

Some practices and approaches used in WA schools do not align with current research and understanding about autism and neurodiversity, and discriminate against and cause harm to autistic students. These include approaches to school-wide behaviour management, as well as some targeted interventions for autistic students.

Recommendation 19

That the Minister for Education direct that the Department of Education’s application of Applied Behaviour Analysis in relation to autistic students be independently reviewed and evaluated.

382 Lisa Wachsmuth, 'Parents call for Collaborative Proactive Solutions for challenging behaviour', *The Daily Telegraph* (web-based), 12 March 2023, accessed 3 February 2024, <<https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/>>.

383 AISNSW, St Philip’s Christian College DALE’s School Based Research Project – One year on, 9 December 2019, accessed 3 February 2024, <<https://www.aisnsw.edu.au/>>; Bronwyn Thoroughgood and Hayley Adcock, 'Implementing 'Collaborative & Proactive Solutions' for students with additional needs', *Scan (NSW Department of Education)*, vol. 40, no. 7, August 2021, p. 13.

384 Submission 87, Department of Education, p. 11.

Students with disability are disproportionately subject to exclusionary discipline

7.10 The Disability Royal Commission found that students with disability were far more likely to be suspended than those without disability.³⁸⁵ Lack of understanding of behaviour was a key driver for inappropriate use of exclusionary discipline, as schools mischaracterised ‘behaviours of concern’ related to disability as wilfully disruptive or unsafe behaviour, rather than attempting to understand or address the underlying cause of the behaviour.³⁸⁶

In Western Australia, students with a disability are approximately twice as likely to be suspended as their non-disabled peers.

- Square Peg Round Whole

7.11 Families also reported frequent informal suspensions where they are called to collect their child early due to challenging behaviour or a critical incident.³⁸⁷

7.12 We support the implementation of Recommendation 7.2 of the Disability Royal Commission regarding prevention of inappropriate use of exclusionary discipline against students with disability.

Some policies have been revised to align with current understandings of disability

7.13 We heard positive feedback that the Department of Education’s recently revised *Student behaviour in public schools* policy and procedures better aligned with current understandings of disability.³⁸⁸ The Department of Education said that the policy review ‘shone a light on, largely, principals working with their staff and communities to create the environment that is welcome, supportive and inclusive of students.’ This reflected a strong move away from traditional behaviour management strategies which were ‘responding to behaviour rather than having the view that behaviour is an expression of communication for kids.’³⁸⁹ The revised policy echoed what many schools were already doing so ‘it was a really easy sell.’³⁹⁰

7.14 The revised policy and procedures, released in July 2023, note that school principals must:

- engage with the school community in a co-design process to develop, document and communicate shared values, ways of working and expectations of positive student behaviour that includes students’ strengths, abilities and diversity
- promote a school culture where students are not discriminated against on the basis of behaviour as a manifestation of disability—this refers to the provisions of the *Disability Discrimination Act 1991*, which recognise that a person with disability may display

385 Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, *Final Report Volume 7: Inclusive education, employment and housing, Part A*, September 2023, p. 163.

386 *ibid.*, p. 166.

387 Submission 6, Name withheld, p. 1; Submission 86, Jodie Wilde, p. 5.

388 Submission 40, Square Peg Round Whole, p. 3; Tasha Alach, *Transcript of Evidence*, 30 August 2023, p. 2.

389 James Bell, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, pp. 6-7.

390 Stuart Percival, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 8.

disruptive behaviours that are characteristic of their disability and the person should not be punished for these

- provide opportunity for student and family voice and use collaborative problem solving for responding to behaviours of concern.³⁹¹

Implementation of the policy was supported by online modules that included trauma-informed practice and restorative approaches.³⁹²

7.15 We are hopeful that the enhanced policy and procedures will have a positive impact on reducing the inappropriate use of exclusionary discipline against students with disability, and ensuring that behaviour management practices do not discriminate against autistic students.

Finding 28

The Department of Education's recent revision of the *Student behaviour in public schools* policy and procedures better reflects current understandings of disability.

The Department of Education has strengthened its stakeholder consultation processes for disability and inclusion

7.16 It was also encouraging to learn that the Department of Education has established two committees to strengthen stakeholder consultation processes and ensure the views of people with disability receive proper understanding and consideration:

- Disability and Inclusion Advisory Group, which is made up of representatives of the broader disability community, including peak disability advocacy groups, agency partners and researchers
- Disability and Inclusion Consultative Committee, which is made up of people with lived experience of disability.

These groups held their inaugural meetings in August 2023, and will meet each semester.³⁹³ They should act as an appropriate structure for responding to concerns about the use of specific practices and approaches, and ensuring that practices promoted for use in schools are current and evidence-based.

7.17 It is worth noting that the Equal Opportunity Commission's *Policy Framework for Substantive Equality*, released in 2005 and extended in 2013, obliges state government agencies to form strategic partnerships with anti-discrimination organisations and communities that often face discrimination. It also requires agencies to review policies and programs to identify barriers to service and make recommendations to remove such barriers.³⁹⁴ Establishing the two disability and inclusion committees is an important accountability measure and in line with the Department's obligations under the framework. Ideally, this should be complemented by employing autistic and neurodiverse leaders and staff within the

391 Department of Education, *Student Behaviour in Public Schools Procedures*, 17 July 2023, pp. 3, 5, 6, 11.

392 Stuart Percival, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 8.

393 Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, Letter, 28 November 2023, Attachment 1.

394 Submission 42, Equal Opportunity Commission, p. 1.

Department and in schools who can guide the implementation of strategies and practices to support autistic and neurodiverse students.³⁹⁵

Finding 29

The Department of Education recently established two disability and inclusion committees to strengthen its stakeholder consultation processes and the voice of people with disability.

Communication and collaboration between families and schools remains challenging

7.18 Parents of autistic children possess a wealth of knowledge that can be leveraged to support children at school³⁹⁶ and a positive relationship between home and school is ‘fundamental to where good outcomes can begin’ for autistic students.³⁹⁷ The importance of this relationship is also reflected in the various legislative and policy frameworks around supporting students with disability at school, which require family consultation and communication.

7.19 However, stakeholders to the inquiry identified that building constructive relationships between schools and families is a persistent challenge.³⁹⁸ A survey conducted by the South West Autism Network showed that about one third of parents said they were not included in the development of their child’s Individual Education Plan.³⁹⁹

Identifying ways to involve parents and their knowledge within the school environment, while also preserving the autonomy of schools, is currently a challenge to supporting autistic students.

- Submission 30, Telethon Kids Institute

We recently left a Catholic school due to their lack of flexibility in relation to a suggested behaviour management approach for our son. They did not welcome our input and could not point to any evidence that the plan that they had proposed would work or was in any way evidence-based. We were very bluntly told that the plan would not be changed, and we could ‘take it or leave it’. Parents need to feel confident that their input and feedback will be respected by all schools.⁴⁰⁰

... zero collaboration on the IEP. They presented it to me in a meeting and expected me to just sign it. I had not even met the classroom teacher before this meeting. There were no accommodations in the IEP.⁴⁰¹

395 Submission 62, Reframing Autism, p. 8.

396 Submission 30, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 6; Carrie Clark and Renée Darbyshir, Kiind, *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 September 2023, p. 6.

397 Chris Champion, Positive Partnerships, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, p. 7.

398 Submission 45, PDA Perth WA Parents Support Group, p. 3.

399 Submission 89, South West Autism Network, p. 21.

400 Submission 7, Name withheld, p. 1.

401 Submission 40, Square Peg Round Whole WA, p. 19.

7.20 As discussed earlier, one of the barriers to communication and collaboration between schools and families is time. However, one educator agreed that attitudinal barriers also impede communication and collaboration:

Working with parents is critical. Professional arrogance is rife and many parents are intimidated by the school system. Schools and educators need to pay heed to their mission statements that more often than not recognise the important role parents play, however their treatment of parents does not often reflect this.⁴⁰²

7.21 Founder of the PDA Perth WA Parents Support Group, Heidi Brandis, said she encourages parents to raise any concerns first with schools, but inadequate responses generally lead to escalation:

Most parents will approach the principal if they have the confidence, the resources—emotionally, intellectually and otherwise—to do so. They are generally shut down and treated as difficult and annoying. Like, lay it on top of their child’s annoying behaviour, and now you have got this annoying parent. This is the response that most of them receive. If people come back to me when they have received that type of response, which is very frequently, then I encourage them to go to district office and explain that that is the response they have received.⁴⁰³

7.22 When we asked the Department why communication and consultation challenges between schools and families persist despite strong legislative and policy requirements, we did not find their response to be satisfactory. Initially, we were told:

We certainly have the policy positions in place and we have a range of supports. I do not know that this panel could talk to the motivations of individual principals about why they would not choose to comply or to access the supports... Why the message is not getting through, I do not know.⁴⁰⁴

7.23 The Director General later acknowledged that communication is ‘an ongoing challenge’ and it had established a parent liaison office within the Department’s professional standards and conduct directorate. Its role is to handle complaints and act as ‘somewhere that parents can go; if they are frustrated by their school, then they can go and talk to somebody.’⁴⁰⁵

7.24 These responses indicate that the Department does not view communication difficulties between schools and families as a systemic issue. While effective complaints mechanisms are important, it seems far preferable to us that as much effort as possible should be made to ensure that communication difficulties between families and schools do not escalate to such a point of frustration.

402 Submission 32, Name withheld, p. 1.

403 Heidi Brandis, PDA Perth WA Parents Support Group, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, p. 7.

404 Stuart Percival, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 8.

405 Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, pp. 8-9.

Finding 30

Despite strong legislative and policy requirements for schools to consult and communicate with families regarding support for autistic students, widespread difficulties with this persist.

Specialist support does not directly involve families

7.25 The School of Special Educational Needs: Disability (SSEN:D) service model is that it is a resource for schools based on a request for assistance. We received evidence that the direct interaction of consultants with students and families is limited by this service model.⁴⁰⁶ One parent told us:

... there is a very strong opaque barrier between parents and the SSEN professionals. They are supposed to be there to educate the teachers, not to support the child, not to engage with us, and that, I think, needs to be looked at, because there are obviously reasons for that. Those boundaries are important in some ways, but also it causes communication challenges and problems. It is really problematic if you go to school and someone has a great chat with the SSEN:D teacher who is there, and then suddenly we are all getting told off for having spoken to each other. It is not sensible.⁴⁰⁷

7.26 SSEN:D Principal, Joanna Hall, acknowledged that the relationship between family and school is 'absolutely critical'. SSEN:D support is based on a 'collaborative support plan' because 'it is really important that parents are informed and aware of any possible adjustments that we are suggesting' and 'sign off on that as well.' At times, SSEN:D may also be called in to navigate conflict between a school and family. However, their interaction with students and families ultimately 'depends on what the school is actually asking us to do' in their request for assistance.⁴⁰⁸

7.27 Further, SSEN:D's service model is designed to build capability within schools to implement strategies and for schools to communicate with families themselves about evidence-based practices. Catholic Education Western Australia also noted that the role of their specialist support team is to build capacity in schools to be able to provide information about evidence-based practices to parents themselves.⁴⁰⁹

7.28 We agree that it isn't appropriate for external consultants to come in and take over the primary relationship between schools and families. However, as the experts recommending evidence-based practices, they should be available to families to receive direct input and discuss their advice. As discussed earlier, resource constraints may also limit the ability of consultants to engage directly with students and families.

406 Submission 39, Kiind, p. 11.

407 Closed evidence.

408 Joanna Hall, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 13.

409 Paula Power, Catholic Education Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, p. 7.

Finding 31

The service model for specialist support from the School of Special Educational Needs: Disability (SSEN:D) does not support direct communication and consultation with families.

Recommendation 20

That the Minister for Education review the service model and resourcing for the School of Special Educational Needs: Disability (SSEN:D) to ensure that consultant teachers are available to engage directly with students and families.

Little information is published about supports for autistic students at school

7.29 Engagement between parents and educators involves an imbalance of power and relies on parents' confidence and skills in collaboration and advocacy. Parents need support to understand the school context and resources available for their child.⁴¹⁰ While this should ideally be done through communicating directly with the school, general information and resources are also helpful. However, we heard that there is a lack of easily accessible resources and information available about the kinds of support and accommodations that can be provided for autistic students and the evidence base for interventions.⁴¹¹ We heard from a disability social worker who supported families with significant and prolonged educational access difficulties:

In virtually all of the cases I worked with, families were not aware of what sorts of disability support and accommodation could be provided to assist their child's learning and inclusion. When inappropriate or even harmful strategies were employed, families either attempted self-advocating (often without the best methods, resulting in them being perceived as troublesome) or started keeping their child home from school altogether.⁴¹²

7.30 The Diverse Learners Hub is the flagship initiative of the Victorian Autism Education Strategy (see Box 3). A multidisciplinary team partners with experts in learning diversity to access and share up-to-date and reliable research, and develops evidence-based practice advice, information and resources for the education workforce, diverse learners and families.⁴¹³ Its 'hub and spokes' model was developed to build capability across the system, and incorporates elements of the Queensland Department of Education's Autism Hub, which was established in 2015.⁴¹⁴ Both are accessible, easily navigable and contain a range of information and resources in various formats.

7.31 In its submission, the Department of Education referred to its own hubs – namely, the support for students with diverse learning needs hub, and the connected learning hub – as equivalent Western Australia resources. The key difference is that these are resources only for schools. They are not publicly accessible. Information on the Department's public

410 Submission 39, Kiind, pp. 11-12.

411 *ibid.*, p. 11; Submission 7, Name withheld, p. 1; Submission 44, Name withheld, p. 5; Submission 91; Name withheld, p. 2.

412 Submission 47, Name withheld, p. 4.

413 Stephen Fraser, Department of Education (Victoria), *Briefing*, 31 July 2023.

414 Department of Education (Queensland), *Autism Hub*, accessed 24 January 2023, <<https://autismhub.education.qld.gov.au/>>.

website is limited to a general page about students with special educational needs⁴¹⁵, and a page about education support schools, centres and programs.⁴¹⁶ Autism-specific information is limited to information about the Specialist Learning Programs and Early Intensive Intervention Programs.⁴¹⁷ There is no information about evidence-based practices to support autistic students in mainstream schools.

- 7.32 In our view, the benefit of the Victorian and Queensland hubs is that they provide authoritative, evidence-based information for both schools and families. This is an open and transparent starting point for building both inclusive school cultures and constructive working relationships between schools and families.

Finding 32

The Department of Education publishes very little information or resources about evidence-based practices to support autistic children at school. There is no information about supporting autistic students in mainstream settings.

Recommendation 21

That the Minister for Education ensures that the Department of Education significantly expands its range of publicly available information and resources on evidence-based practices to support autistic students at school, and promotes its availability so that families and schools can access the same information.

Families are unsure of their rights and responsibilities, and avenues for review

- 7.33 Families reported that they were unsure of what to do when they were dissatisfied with a school's response to supporting their autistic child, and did not know if they could request a review of that decision, or how. A survey by the South West Autism Association revealed that about two thirds of parents did not know how to make a complaint about support for their autistic child.⁴¹⁸ A disability social worker again told us:

Parents generally aren't aware of complaint pathways or processes, especially when the parent has their own limitations or disability difficulties, and often found it easier to disengage than challenge the systems that are foreign to them without support.⁴¹⁹

- 7.34 Difficulty engaging with complex bureaucracy and complaints processes is particularly difficult when parents were already under significant stress. This evidence echoes findings of the Disability Royal Commission that the complaint process can be time consuming,

415 Department of Education, *Children with special educational needs*, accessed 24 January 2024, <<https://www.education.wa.edu.au/>>.

416 Department of Education, *Education support schools, centres and programs*, accessed 24 January 2024, <<https://www.education.wa.edu.au/>>.

417 School of Special Educational Needs: Disability, *Targeted Initiatives in Western Australian public schools for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)*, accessed 24 January 2024, <<https://www.oneclassroom.wa.edu.au/>>.

418 Submission 89, South West Autism Network, p. 26.

419 Submission 47, Name withheld, p. 4.

expensive and emotionally burdensome for students with disability and their families, which may deter them from making complaints.⁴²⁰

- 7.35 Families also expressed a desire to have the opportunity to raise their concerns with an independent third party or access mediation.⁴²¹ The Disability Royal Commission noted that while complainants in WA had the option to request a review of their matter if they were dissatisfied with the outcome, there was no option for independent resolution.⁴²² The Department of Education’s website now states that an independent review can be requested at any stage throughout the complaint process.⁴²³
- 7.36 We support the adoption of the Disability Royal Commission’s recommendation 7.10 regarding complaint management.

Finding 33

Families are unsure of complaints pathways regarding support for their autistic child at school, and have very limited avenues for independent review.

Public reporting can strengthen accountability

- 7.37 We already recommended that measurable performance measures at school and system level should form part of any neurodiversity education strategy developed in Western Australia. However, stakeholders advocated that educational equity data should be publicly reported as a general accountability measure. Suggested reportable data include:
- suspension data, with disaggregation for disabled and Aboriginal students
 - enrolment data of students enrolled in mainstream and segregated learning environments (on the basis that an increase in enrolments in segregated learning environments is indicative of an inability to access appropriate education through mainstream education)
 - homeschooling data, disaggregated for disabled students, and reasons for adopting homeschooling
 - attendance, retention and educational attainment for students with disability.⁴²⁴
- 7.38 Square Peg Round Whole noted that there is no consistency in how the states and territories report data on exclusionary discipline, and that only New South Wales and Victoria report this data with disaggregation for students with disability.⁴²⁵

420 Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, *Final Report, Volume 7: Inclusive education, employment and housing, Part A*, September 2023, p. 257.

421 Helen Pedersen, PDA Perth WA Parents Support Group, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, p. 6; Closed evidence.

422 Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, *Final Report, Volume 7: Inclusive education, employment and housing, Part A*, September 2023, p. 256.

423 Department of Education, *Understand the complaints process*, accessed 5 February 2024, <<https://www.education.wa.edu.au/>>.

424 Submission 40, Square Peg Round Whole, p. 15; Square Peg Round Whole, Additional information, 8 October 2023.

425 Square Peg Round Whole, Additional information, 8 October 2023.

- 7.39 The Disability Royal Commission recommended that the Education Ministers Meeting should publicly report annually on the educational experiences and outcomes of students with disability.⁴²⁶ We support this recommendation and, as an additional measure, recommend that the Department of Education should commit to reporting educational equity data sets publicly.

Finding 34

Data collection, analysis and publication on educational equity and outcomes for students with disability is an important measure of accountability.

Recommendation 22

That the Minister for Education commit to collecting and publicly reporting educational equity data sets, disaggregated for students with disability and other equity cohorts.

⁴²⁶ Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, *Final Report Volume 7: Inclusive education, employment and housing, Part A*, September 2023, p. 248.

Chapter 8

Coordinating supports at school and beyond

Services don't coordinate well

- 8.1 Autistic students and their families frequently interact with various government agencies, including health, community and disability services, as well as education. Families told us that agencies don't interact with each other, and that they often feel as though they are being 'handballed'.⁴²⁷ This is time consuming, stressful and requires families to 'tell their story' repeatedly.⁴²⁸ Professor Whitehouse told us:

I think our systems of health, education and disability, which of course cross state and federal responsibilities, have created an additional barrier to the lives of kids and families who are already under significant strain... We have never had as much money in disability —anywhere close to this—in the last 20 to 30 years. It has never been worse. How have we gotten to the point where life is actually more challenging for families?⁴²⁹

We repeatedly find ourselves falling into cracks in the Education, Health, Community and Disability sectors... Inhabiting these cracks is harmful, exhausting and unsustainable.

*- Parents of two autistic boys,
Submission 20*

There are barriers to productive working relationships between therapists and schools

- 8.2 The Committee heard about difficulties coordinating supports between school and therapy providers.⁴³⁰

It seems to me that the lack of a coordinated approach to link the school with my son's external support providers (speech therapist, psychologist) is a lost opportunity to make sure they're all working collaboratively to maximise the outcomes for my child.⁴³¹

We have had a school completely refuse to allow any therapists on school grounds for any child with less than a level 3 diagnosis. Autism is a dynamic disability. How it affects a person changes from day to day. Denying access to services in a school environment simply because of an allocated level which does not fully reflect my son's disability is not supported by any evidence, it is [a] decision made purely for administrative ease by a school.⁴³²

427 Submission 25, Name withheld, p. 3.

428 Submission 43, Name withheld, p. 1; Submission 52, Name withheld, p. 3.

429 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 March 2023, p. 3.

430 *ibid.*, p. 5; Submission 7, Name withheld, p. 1.

431 Submission 63, Western Australian Council of State School Organisations, p. 6.

432 Submission 23, Name withheld, p. 2.

- 8.3 The Committee heard that the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) has created additional challenges in coordinating services. The sheer numbers of therapists seeking access to students at school creates a significant administrative burden for school, with some schools liaising with up to 50-100 different therapists.⁴³³ The consequence of this burden may be for schools to have to employ a dedicated person from within their school budget to liaise with therapy providers, or for schools to prevent access by service providers altogether.⁴³⁴ Many schools also lack appropriate spaces to accommodate service providers onsite.⁴³⁵
- 8.4 Schools report that they struggle to develop collaborative arrangements with NDIS service providers, who may be unwilling to share their strategies and resources but, conversely, ‘make very high expectations of what the schools should be doing to support them.’⁴³⁶ The NDIS funding model limits the service providers’ ability to problem-solve alongside teachers with the whole classroom dynamic in mind. Therapists’ recommendations may conflict with individualised recommendations made by other service providers for other children in the same classroom.⁴³⁷
- 8.5 The Western Australian Primary Principals’ Association said that when principals ‘push back’ in the face of these challenges, therapists will portray them to parents as uncooperative when, in fact, what they are seeking is a ‘real collaborative approach.’⁴³⁸
- 8.6 The Department of Education acknowledged these issues and noted it had responded by developing and publishing guidelines and resources on interconnected home-school-therapy approaches in late 2021.⁴³⁹
- 8.7 The Autism Association of Western Australia also acknowledged the administrative burden on schools coordinating requests from many private therapists to attend onsite, and the publication of the Department’s guidelines. However, it said there was more work to be done to create sustainable changes. It noted that not all therapists understand school environments and the integration of therapy and educational goals. Through partnerships between specialist organisations such as theirs and the Department of Education, frameworks could be developed for good practice to maximise the best outcomes for students:

The challenge is that there is not good governance around even therapists understanding “Before you come into this school, this is the model of how we expect you to work.”... We need to invest in a framework that gives therapists the skills and expertise to be able to work within the best practice framework for therapy and education, but also give schools the tools to be able to screen

433 Submission 44, Name withheld, p. 4.

434 Submission 30, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 7.

435 Submission 39, Kiind, p. 11.

436 Submission 55, Western Australian Primary Principals’ Association, p. 6.

437 Submission 30, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 6.

438 Niel Smith, Western Australian Primary Principals’ Association, *Transcript of Evidence*, 18 October 2023, p. 15.

439 Stuart Percival, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 16; Submission 87, Department of Education, p. 8.

providers, to, really, dictate the terms of practice in that environment based on getting the best outcomes for the student.⁴⁴⁰

- 8.8 It also recommended sector-wide training for therapists on how to deliver best practice therapy within an educational framework.⁴⁴¹
- 8.9 We also acknowledge the findings and recommendations of the NDIS Review—namely, that:
- the individualised approach of NDIS supports often fails to integrate with the classroom experience⁴⁴²
 - the National Disability Insurance Agency and education and disability agencies should develop a plan to better connect the NDIS and school education systems, to ensure funding and supports are complementary, connected and outcomes focused⁴⁴³
 - there should be joint investment in mainstream and foundational supports, including in relation to education and early childhood services, which coordinate with individualised NDIS supports.⁴⁴⁴
- 8.10 These actions should also support stronger, productive partnerships between therapy providers, families and schools.

Finding 35

Various barriers make it difficult for schools and therapists to work productively together to support autistic students, including practical and administrative challenges and difficulty aligning educational and therapy approaches and goals.

Autistic students need extra support to transition to post-school life

- 8.11 Professor Girdler highlighted that the transition to young adulthood for autistic individuals is very difficult, as their social skills are challenged, their routines are changed and they have to learn new life skills in new life areas.⁴⁴⁵ Transition supports and services are vital in empowering autistic students as they prepare to leave school and embark on their next phase of life:

These supports and services should provide essential guidance, resources, and skills development to ensure a smooth and successful transition into higher education, vocational training, employment, and independent living, setting a strong foundation for future endeavours.⁴⁴⁶

- 8.12 However, research suggests there is a shortfall in the provision and suitability of these supports for autistic students.⁴⁴⁷ Many services for autistic individuals and families focus on early development and school years. Consequently, adult services are under-resourced to

440 Tasha Alach, Autism Association of Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 30 August 2023, pp. 8-9.

441 Submission 78, Autism Association of Western Australia, p. 21.

442 Independent Review into the National Disability Insurance Scheme, *Working Together to deliver the NDIS: Final report*, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, October 2023, p. 69.

443 *ibid.*, Action 2.8, p. 77.

444 *ibid.*, Action 1.12, p. 64.

445 Professor Sonya Girdler, Curtin Autism Research Group, *Transcript of Evidence*, 29 March 2023, p. 9.

446 Submission 27, Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre, p. 6.

447 *ibid.*, p. 6.

manage the period of transition as autistic adolescents exit school and enter adulthood.⁴⁴⁸ This was reflected in evidence to the inquiry from families:

We will try and get [our son] to start with TAFE next year, but we are not sure if he will cope with the transition, hopefully all the therapist hours and work we've put in to help him will have him ready for it.⁴⁴⁹

Would be fantastic to have more support programs and strategies for preparing year 12 students with ASD for the transition into adulthood in a regional setting.⁴⁵⁰

My son has three days left of school. I know better than most the different things that are out there, and yet I am still going, "I have no idea what we are going to do next year."⁴⁵¹

8.13 Research has found that universities are unprepared for an influx of autistic students, and there is limited research on post-secondary interventions. Professor Girdler also told us there is no universal transition to post-high school education programs, and while Curtin University has a specialist peer mentoring program for autistic students, other universities do not.⁴⁵²

8.14 With respect to transitioning from education to employment, Professor Whitehouse told us that:

We have highly capable people who are desperate to contribute to the labour force for their own independence, sense of purpose, belonging and all those things, and their families are also desperate, but they are unable to break into the workforce. It is not necessarily due to a diagnosis of autism but due to the way that we select people.⁴⁵³

8.15 We heard that government has a role to play in incentivising employment for autistic people, and 'educating and building capacity within employers who are willing, ready and do not see it necessarily as a social obligation, although it is that, but also as a capitalistic asset and opportunity.'⁴⁵⁴ Curtin Autism Research Group has conducted research on the success of its CoderDojo program and Autism Academy for Software Quality Assurance in building employment skills in autistic teenagers and connections with the information technology and cybersecurity industries through internships (see Box 10). Professor Girdler told us there is scope to translate these programs into practice in the education system to improve post-school transition outcomes for autistic teenagers.⁴⁵⁵

448 Curtin Autism Research Group, *Leaving high school*, March 2021, accessed 15 February 2024, <<https://carg.curtin.edu.au/>>.

449 Submission 76, Name withheld, p. 1.

450 Submission 63, Western Australian Council of State School Organisations, p. 8.

451 Dr Emily Pearce, *Furthering Autistic Children's Education and Schooling (FACES)*, *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 September 2023, p. 5.

452 Professor Sonya Girdler, Curtin Autism Research Group, *Transcript of Evidence*, 29 March 2023, p. 11.

453 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 March 2023, p. 13.

454 *ibid.*, p. 13.

455 Professor Sonya Girdler, Curtin Autism Research Group, *Transcript of Evidence*, 29 March 2023, p. 5.

Box 10: Curtin Autism Research Group's CoderDojo program and Autism Academy for Software Quality Assurance

Approximately 10 years ago, autism researchers at Curtin University started a coding club on weekends with autistic teenagers, recognising that many of the skills and abilities of autistic people related to areas of coding and mathematic ability.

The CoderDojo model combines a uniquely informal and unstructured social environment with computer and technology activities for all students over 12 years. It is not funded, and is run on a volunteer basis, guided by Curtin student mentors studying computer science, software engineering, or cyber security. As of 2023 there were 200 autistic students enrolled, and there are also satellite programs throughout the metropolitan area.

There has been evidence that the CoderDojo program improves outcomes for autistic teenagers, with many of them making connections with relevant industries and continuing on to internship programs with BHP, Bankwest, and other industries in WA.

Curtin University also runs an Autism Academy for Software Quality Assurance (AASQA) which is Curtin's flagship outreach program aimed at helping autistic people leverage their potential in programming, robotics, and digital arts. It provides high-level expertise and services in assessment, training, education and work placements for autistic individuals in the software testing industry. There is also an AASQA CoderDojo for 7-17 year old autistic students to socialise and share ideas and projects.

Other initiatives to promote employment in this sector amongst autistic teenagers include an Australian federal government grant looking at CyberSET, which develops resources, tools, and frameworks to engage girls and neurodivergent teenagers in cybersecurity and coding.

Source: Professor Sonya Girdler, Curtin Autism Research Group, *Transcript of Evidence*, 29 March 2023, p. 5; Curtin University, *CoderDojo@Curtin*, 2024, accessed 15 February 2024, <<https://www.curtin.edu.au/engage/outreach-offerings/stem-outreach/programs-and-events/coder-dojocurtin/>>; Curtin University, *Autism Academy*, 2024, accessed 15 February 2024, <<https://research.curtin.edu.au/research-infrastructure/autism-academy/>>.

- 8.16 Improving career education and pathway planning for students with disability was an identified focus area of the first Victorian Autism Plan.⁴⁵⁶ The 2023 refresh includes a focus on ensuring autistic learners have access to training and job-based education, and strengthening individual supports for autistic students in Vocational Education and Training.⁴⁵⁷
- 8.17 Catholic Education Western Australia said there are still gaps between post-school providers and schools supporting students transitioning to adult life.⁴⁵⁸ It developed resources to 'start the conversations' in Year 10 to focus on the student's strengths and aspirations, and their Students With Disabilities consultants are 'heavily involved' in transition meetings. An additional consultant proactively contacts every Catholic secondary school to provide additional guidance around transitions for students with higher-level needs, so 'by the time they finish school, it is not a surprise as to what they might be doing.'⁴⁵⁹
- 8.18 Furthering Autistic Children's Education and Schooling (FACES) advocate a 'Year 13' model where the students who remain have a year of transitioning between an education setting and a supported workplace environment.⁴⁶⁰ We are aware that education support settings

456 Department of Health and Human Services (Victoria), *Victorian autism plan*, December 2019, p. 37.

457 Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (Victoria), *Victorian autism plan: 2023 refresh*, November 2023, p. 8.

458 Submission 16, Catholic Education Western Australia, p. 10.

459 Paula Power, Catholic Education Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, p. 10.

460 Dr Emily Pearce, Furthering Autistic Children's Education and Schooling, *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 September 2023, p. 5.

offer this model, although we did not receive evidence about any specialist support offered to autistic students in mainstream schools to transition to post-school life.

Finding 36

There is scope to strengthen connections between the education system and post-school providers to improve outcomes for autistic students transitioning to post-school life.

A coordinated cross-sector approach will improve outcomes

- 8.19 Partnerships and pathways across agencies that support autistic children and young people are vital in improving outcomes. We heard that child and parent centres run by the Department of Education are a ‘major weapon’ in providing opportunities to support children and families from very early in life by creating protective communities. Education settings provide similar opportunities for agencies to connect to provide holistic support to autistic children and their families.⁴⁶¹
- 8.20 However, evidence to the inquiry revealed that there is also a need to coordinate and improve supports for autistic people across the lifespan. This was also reflected in the findings of the Senate Select Committee on Autism—namely, that a complex and poorly integrated service environment, lack of understanding about autism and inappropriate service design were all drivers of poor outcomes for autistic people.⁴⁶²
- 8.21 Other jurisdictions have developed or are developing whole-of-government autism strategies to coordinate the functions of government and organisations to support the needs of autistic people—these include Victoria, South Australia (see Box 11) and a National Autism Strategy (as recommended by the Senate Select Committee on Autism). Stakeholders to this inquiry were largely supportive of a similar strategy being developed in Western Australia to coordinate and improve services and supports for autistic people.⁴⁶³ In particular, Western Australia faces ‘peculiar state-based issues’ that a national strategy cannot completely address and there would need to be a focus on delivery of the strategy in regional and remote areas.⁴⁶⁴
- 8.22 Some stakeholders, including the Department of Education, were hesitant about investing in bureaucracy rather than services and supports.⁴⁶⁵ As discussed earlier in this report, there were also concerns that an autism-specific strategy would necessarily draw focus from

461 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 October 2023, pp. 2, 6.

462 Senate Select Committee on Autism, *Services, support and life outcomes for autistic Australians*, March 2022, pp. vi-ix.

463 Tasha Alach, Autism Association of Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 30 August 2023, p. 14; Dr Emily Pearce, Furthering Autistic Children’s Education and Schooling (FACES), *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 September 2023, p. 13; Carrie Clark, Kiind, *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 September 2023, p. 8; Chris Champion, Positive Partnerships, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 November 2023, p. 11; Submission 27, Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre, p. 3; Submission 41, I CAN Network, p. 5; Submission 30, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 8.

464 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 March 2023, p. 11; Nick Avery, South West Autism Network, *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 September 2023, p. 8.

465 Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 November 2023, p. 20; Closed evidence.

supporting other disabilities or neurodevelopmental conditions, and there would be greater benefits from a strategy that focused on neurodiversity more broadly.⁴⁶⁶ However, we were told it is ‘perhaps inarguable’ that the speed at which policy reforms have been driven in South Australia would not have happened without the specific autism focus, which has ‘leapfrogged’ South Australia to be a national leader:

I have been really pleasantly surprised at how quickly a clear policy and ministerial focus on this area has actually driven tangible changes. I am coming around to the fact that I think that a named focus on autism or, as I say, neurodivergence, can drive not just quick wins, the now-for-now, but also those now-for-later things, those generational changes that are going to be important, perhaps within the term of an existing government, but certainly within the terms of future governments.⁴⁶⁷

Box 11: South Australian Assistant Minister and Office for Autism

In August 2022, the South Australian Government announced the appointment of Hon. Emily Bourke MLC to the newly created role of Assistant Minister for Autism, the first of its kind in the world. It is the role of the Assistant Minister for Autism to work with the South Australian autistic and autism communities to help build autistic inclusion.

The Office for Autism was established within the Department of the Premier and Cabinet and is led by an autistic director. It aims to promote positive change informed by lived experience, reflect community need, and bridge the gap between government and community. The Office will drive the development and launch of the Autism Inclusion Charter which will guide a whole-of-government approach to supporting autistic and autism communities.

The SA Government has also made funding commitments to implement a whole-of-government autism strategy to support autistic people across the life span. The strategy aims to create a more inclusive and knowledgeable society where autistic people can participate meaningfully in the community. Extensive consultation was undertaken with the autistic and autism communities including community forums, surveys, and submissions, and the release of a discussion paper. The discussion paper saw over 1,200 people, 33 per cent autistic, engaging across the state to co-design and inform the strategy.

An Autism Strategy Advisory Committee has been established by the Department of Human Services to provide strategic advice, and a strong voice for autistic and autism communities to help shape the development and guide the implementation of the Strategy and Charter.

The peak body for autism in South Australia, Autism SA, told us that the state strategy would be more effective and have a greater impact than the National Autism Strategy, largely because of the commitment of senior government leaders to driving it.

Source: Government of South Australia, *The Office for Autism*, 2023, accessed 15 February 2024, <<https://www.officeforautism.sa.gov.au/about-the-office-for-autism>>; Hon. Emily Bourke MLC, Assistant Minister for Autism, *Briefing*, 2 August 2023; Helen Graham, Autism SA, *Briefing*, 2 August 2023.

8.23 We are supportive of the development of a Neurodiversity Strategy for Western Australia to coordinate efforts to improve life outcomes for autistic and neurodiverse people. This would encompass a broader range of conditions, with autism remaining as the primary category for focus. As the prevalence of autism increases, strategic preparation for and response to the needs of autistic people will be vital to ensure that outcomes for autistic Western Australians do not go backwards.

466 Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Telethon Kids Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 October 2023, p. 8.

467 *ibid.*, p. 8.

- 8.24 Similarly to a Neurodiversity Education Strategy, leadership and co-design by autistic and neurodiverse people will be key to the success of any whole-of-government strategy, as well as settings measurable goals and performance measures.

Finding 37

Services that support autistic people across the lifespan are fragmented, and better coordination will be key to improving life outcomes for autistic people.

Recommendation 23

That the Premier support the development of a whole-of-government neurodiversity strategy, led and co-designed by autistic and neurodiverse people, that focuses on improving life outcomes for autistic and neurodiverse Western Australians.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris Tallett". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line at the end.

MR C.J. TALLENTIRE, MLA
CHAIR

Appendix One

Committee's functions and powers

The functions of the Committee are to review and report to the Assembly on:

- a) the outcomes and administration of the departments within the Committee's portfolio responsibilities;
- b) annual reports of government departments laid on the Table of the House;
- c) the adequacy of legislation and regulations within its jurisdiction; and
- d) any matters referred to it by the Assembly including a bill, motion, petition, vote or expenditure, other financial matter, report or paper.

At the commencement of each Parliament and as often thereafter as the Speaker considers necessary, the Speaker will determine and table a schedule showing the portfolio responsibilities for each committee. Annual reports of government departments and authorities tabled in the Assembly will stand referred to the relevant committee for any inquiry the committee may make.

Whenever a committee receives or determines for itself fresh or amended terms of reference, the committee will forward them to each standing and select committee of the Assembly and Joint Committee of the Assembly and Council. The Speaker will announce them to the Assembly at the next opportunity and arrange for them to be placed on the notice boards of the Assembly.

Appendix Two

Inquiry process

To better understand challenges facing autistic students at school and how autism research is translated into practice, the Education and Health Standing Committee held two scoping hearings before determining terms of reference for the inquiry. They were with Professor Andrew Whitehouse (Telethon Kids Institute) and Professor Sonya Girdler (Curtin Autism Research Group).

Following these, the Committee resolved to conduct an inquiry into support for autistic children and young people in schools. The inquiry terms of reference were announced by the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly on 18 May 2023 and the details were placed on the Committee's web page with a guide for submissions.

The Committee wrote to a number of stakeholders inviting submissions, and also advertised for submissions in *The West Australian Newspaper* on 27 May 2023. The Committee also used the Legislative Assembly Twitter account to publicise the inquiry and provide information relevant to making a submission. The Committee received 92 submissions in response, which are listed in Appendix Three.

Evidence was also gathered in 17 hearings, two school site visits, and seven interstate briefings in Melbourne and Adelaide. Parties who provided oral evidence to the Committee are listed in Appendix Four.

The Committee is grateful to all those who made contributions to the inquiry.

Appendix Three

Submissions received

No.	Person/Organisation
1	Name withheld
2	Closed submission
3	Name withheld
4	Name withheld
5	Western Australian Education Support Principals and Administrators Association
6	Name withheld
7	Name withheld
8	Name withheld
9	Dr Kim Pedlow
10	Rebecca Walker
11	Closed submission
12	Name withheld
13	Name withheld
14	Name withheld
15	Amanda Rogers
16	Catholic Education Western Australia
16A	
17	Name withheld
18	NSW Department of Education
19	Department of Education Queensland
20	Name withheld
21	Tanya Princi
22	Name withheld
23	Name withheld
24	Name withheld
25	Name withheld
26	Closed submission
27	Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre, La Trobe University
28	Dr Sarah Bernard
29	Closed submission
30	Telethon Kids Institute
31	Closed submission
32	Name withheld

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33	Closed submission
34	Department for Education Children and Young People Tasmania
35	Closed submission
36	Chelsea Rutter
37	Closed submission
38	Amaze
39	Kiind
40	Square Peg Round Whole WA
41	I CAN Network
42	Equal Opportunity Commission
43	Name withheld
44	Name withheld
45	PDA Perth WA Parents Support Group
46	Name withheld
47	Name withheld
48	Name withheld
49	Name withheld
50	Closed submission
51	John Brigg
52	Name withheld
53	Closed submission
54	Autism SA
55	Western Australian Primary Principals' Association
56	Autism Teaching Institute
57	Name withheld
58	Furthering Autistic Children's Education and School
59	Government of South Australia
60	Department of Communities
61	Name withheld
62	Reframing Autism
63	Western Australian Council of State School Organisations
64	United Workers Union
65	Closed submission
66	Closed submission
67	Positive Partnerships
68	Name withheld
69	Name withheld
70	Michelle Glisenti

Submissions received

71	Name withheld
72	Name withheld
73	Name withheld
74	Georgina Ker
75	Name withheld
76	Name withheld
77	Name withheld
78	Autism Association of Western Australia
79	Closed submission
80	Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Western Australia
81	Name withheld
82	Name withheld
83	Name withheld
84	Closed submission
85	Department of Health
86	Jodie Wilde
87	Department of Education
88	Name withheld
89	South West Autism Network
90	Name withheld
91	Name withheld
92	Steffanie Rogers

Appendix Four

Hearings

Date	Name	Position	Organisation
30 August 2023	Grace Lazuardi	Director of Policy Planning and Service Development	Autism Association of Western Australia
	Tasha Alach	Director of Therapy and Clinical Services	
13 September 2023	Nick Avery	Chief Executive Officer	South West Autism Network
	Mel Jacobson	Coordinator	
	Dr Emily Pearce	Chair	Furthering Autistic Children's Education and Schooling (FACES)
	Dr Cindy Smith	Special Education/Educational Psychology Educational Consultant	
	Andrew Oud	Board Member	
20 September 2023	Dr Sarah Bernard	Autistic Medical Doctor, Researcher and Advocate	Square Peg Round Whole
	Tania Cataldo	Member Advocate	
	Symone Wheatley-Hey	Member Advocate and National/State Coordinator	
	Carrie Clark	Chief Executive Officer	Kiind
	Renée Darbyshir	Systemic Advocacy Lead	
11 October 2023	Professor Sonya Girdler	Professor of Occupational Therapy and Director	Curtin Autism Research Group, Curtin University
	Professor Sven Bölte	Expert in Autism	Karolinska Institutet, Region Stockholm, Curtin University
	Professor Andrew Whitehouse	Professor of Autism	Telethon Kids Institute
	Sarah Pillar	Research Development Manager	
18 October 2023	Niel Smith	President	Western Australian Primary Principals' Association
	Melissa Gillett	President	Western Australian Secondary School Executives Association

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	Jane Cunningham	President	Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Western Australia
25 October 2023	Closed hearing		
	Closed hearing		
	Closed hearing		
	Closed hearing		
8 November 2023	Paula Power	Team Leader, Students with Disability Team	Catholic Education Western Australia
	Alana Williams	Funding Executive Officer	
	Helen Pedersen	Moderator	PDA Perth WA Parents Support Group
	Heidi Brandis	Founder and Administrator	
	Steve Metlitzky	Moderator	
	Chris Champion	Director	Positive Partnerships
	Rebecca Wahlsten	WA State Coordinator	
	Adam Howie	National Coordinator, First Nations School and Community Programs	
Katherine Browne	Delivery Team Member		
15 November 2023	Lisa Rodgers	Director General	Department of Education
	James Bell	Deputy Director General	
	Joanna Hall	Principal, School of Special Educational Needs, Disability	
	Stuart Percival	Assistant Executive Director, Service Delivery	
	Mark Utley	Principal, Coodanup College	

Site visits and briefings

Date	Name	Position	Organisation
21 July 2023	Nancy McNally	Principal	Alkimos College
	Mauveen Titlestad	Specialist Learning Program Coordinator	
		Specialist Learning Program teachers	
		Parents of children in the Specialist Learning Program (by phone)	

Hearings, site visits and briefings

		Specialist Learning Program students	
	Stuart Percival	Assistant Executive Director, Service Delivery	Department of Education
	Debbie Hawthorn	Specialist Learning Program Statewide Coordinator	
	Andrew Gorton	Principal	Alkimos Primary School
	Melinda Papadopoff	Specialist Learning Program Coordinator	
		Specialist Learning Program teachers	
		Parents of children in the Specialist Learning Program	
31 July 2023 Melbourne	Rachael Davies	Senior Advisor – Education	Office of the Hon Natalie Hutchins MP, Minister for Education & Women
	Stephen Fraser	Deputy Secretary, School Education Programs and Support	Victorian Department of Education
	Sharon Barry (via videolink)	Executive Director, Inclusive Education Division, SEPS	
	Deb Parker	Director, Inclusive Education Division, SEPS	
	Alan Wilson	Manager, Inclusive Education Division, SEPS	
	Chris Varney	Chief Executive Officer	I CAN Network
	Dr James Ong	Evaluation and Policy Officer	
1 August 2023 Melbourne	Carolyn Jones	Clinical Manager	Olga Tension Autism Research Centre
	Professor Cheryl Dissanayake	OTARC Endowed Chair	
	Professor Alison Lane	Director	
	Associate Professor Josephine Barbaro	Research Director, Identification & Diagnosis	
	Faiza Muhammad Fauzi	Manager, Strategic Projects	
	Jim Mullan	Chief Executive Officer	Amaze
	David Tonge	Chief Operating Officer	

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2 August 2023 Adelaide	Rhoni McFarlane	Director, Inclusive Teaching and Learning	South Australian Department for Education
	Anna Noble	Assistant Director, Inclusive Practice	
	Cathy Cook	Autism Inclusion Teacher	Marryatville Primary School
	Brett Hammerl	Acting Principal	
	Hon. Emily Bourke MLC	Assistant Minister for Autism	South Australian Government
	Maggie Rutjens	Principal Community Engagement Officer	Office for Autism
	Helen Graham	Chief Executive Officer	Autism South Australia
	Rebecca Morton	Executive Manager, Clinical, Care and Community Excellence	
	Maddison Cocks	Business Operations Manager, Clinical Services	
	Sarah Schumann	Business Unit Lead for the Schools Inclusion Program	

Appendix Five

Acronyms

ABA	Applied Behaviour Analysis
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
AIEO	Aboriginal and Islander Education Officer
AIT	Autism Inclusion Teacher
AITSL	Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership
APST	Australian Professional Standards for Teachers
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
Autism CRC	Autism Cooperative Research Centre
CAHS	Child and Adolescent Health Service
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CARG	Curtin Autism Research Group
CDS	Child Development Service
CEWA	Catholic Education Western Australia
CPS	Collaborative Proactive Solutions
DOTT	Duties Other Than Teaching
EA	Education Assistant
EAA	Educational Adjustment Allocation
FACES	Furthering Autistic Children's Education and Schooling
FASD	Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder
FTE	Full Time Equivalent
ICF	International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health
ICPA	Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Western Australia
IDA	Individual Disability Allocation
IEP	Individual Education Plan
IESP	Inclusive Education Support Program
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
NCCD	Nationally Consistent Collection of Data
NDD	Neurodevelopmental disorder
NDIA	National Disability Insurance Agency
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
OECD	The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OTARC	Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre
PBS	Positive Behaviour Support
PDA	Pathological Demand Avoidance

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PEAC	Primary Extension and Challenge
PL	Professional learning
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
SACS	Social Attention and Communication Surveillance
SCFM	Student-Centred Funding Model
SEPS	School Education Programs and Support
SLP	Specialist Learning Program
SNEA	Special Needs Education Assistant
SSEN:D	School of Special Educational Needs: Disability
SSTUWA	State School Teachers' Union of Western Australia
SWAN	South West Autism Network
TKI	Telethon Kids Institute
WACSSO	Western Australian Council of State School Organisations
WAPPA	Western Australian Primary Principals' Association
WASSEA	Western Australian Secondary School Executives Association



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