



12 October 2023

Legislative Council, Legal and Social Issues Committee
Parliament House, Spring Street
East Melbourne. Victoria. 3002.
Submission lodged online.

Dear Committee members,

Parliamentary Inquiry into Victoria's state education system.

Thank you for the invitation to provide a submission to your *Inquiry into Victoria's State Education System*. Our submission focusses on the reforms needed to make Victoria's education system inclusive and accessible for all Autistic students.

Background

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

In recent years, we have worked closely with the Victorian Government on policies and initiatives to improve the experiences and outcomes of Autistic students. We have been proud to work with the Government on the development and roll out of its Disability Inclusion Reforms package and Autism Education Strategy. These reforms are nation leading. They have the capacity to build neuro-affirming school cultures; increase autism understanding across teachers and staff; provide state-wide access to Autistic led peer support and mentoring; support family and school partnerships; improve access to supports and adjustments; and improve the learning, health and wellbeing outcomes of all Autistic students.

However, in the absence of clear targets and outcome measures it is difficult to evaluate the true impacts of these reforms on the experiences and outcomes of Autistic students. We are concerned that academic studies, recent government inquiries (including the [Disability Royal Commission](#), the [Senate Inquiry into the national trend of school refusal and related matters](#)) and our thematic analysis of Autism Connect data show that Autistic students continue to experience significant barriers to learning and inclusion; a lack of choice and control over school options; gate keeping practices: inadequate funding, adjustments and supports; discriminatory suspension and expulsion practices; inadequate post school transition support; inadequate complaints mechanisms; high rates of 'School Can't'; and ongoing exclusionary impacts of Covid-19 lockdowns.

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Amaze Recommendations

1. Build an outcomes framework for Victoria's Disability Inclusion Reforms and Autism Education Strategy.

An outcomes framework is urgently needed to measure the impacts of the Disability Inclusion Reforms and Autism Education Strategy on Victoria's Autistic students. The Framework should include targets for change and transparent outcome measures across key indicators.

Consistent indicators should apply across mainstream and specialist schools and include:

- Increased Year 12 completion rates, including increasing the numbers of Autistic students attaining a Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) or a Victoria Pathways Certificate (VPC).
- Increased proportions of Autistic students completing VCE, compared to a VPC.
- Increased uptake of further and higher education, including TAFE and university, by Autistic students.
- Increased proportions of Autistic students sustaining their enrolment in a mainstream school.
- Increased day-to-day attendance of Autistic students, including reducing practices of decreased hours for Autistic students.
- Decreased rates of disciplinary absences, suspensions, expulsions, and exclusionary practices.

2. Enhance the capacity of Autistic students and their families to set goals and participate in student support groups and inclusion processes.

All students have the right to be actively involved and be self-advocates in their education decision making.

Autistic students and their families must be empowered to fully participate in and drive Victoria's disability inclusion processes, such as student support group meetings and the development of Disability Inclusion Profiles and Individualised Education Plans.

Capacity building should include investment in information resources co-designed by Autistic students, their families, and representative organisations.

3. Increase access to Autistic led student mentoring, peer support and staff training.

Autistic-led peer support and mentoring is being delivered by the I CAN Network across more than 100 government schools, as part of the Autism Education Strategy.

Recent [evaluations](#) of these programs demonstrate that they are having a positive impact by improving social and communication skills, building connections and a sense of belonging, and building self-confidence and self-acceptance.

The I CAN Network's program should be rolled out across all Victorian schools as soon as possible. To support the development of neuro-affirming schools and build teacher and leadership capacities to support Autistic students, Autistic led organisations should also be funded to provide Autistic led training for Inclusion Outreach Coaches and education leaders.

4. Ensure teacher shortages are not compromising access and inclusion.

Teacher shortages, and a lack of permanent or regular staff can be particularly challenging for Autistic students who struggle with uncertainty, inconsistency and difficulties understanding expectations. Compounding these difficulties, Casual Relief Teachers are rarely provided with adequate information on Autistic children and their learning support needs to provide meaningful inclusion and accessibility. We are aware that some Autistic students have been asked to attend school part time, or only when adequate staff are available to support them.

Targeted actions to reduce the burdens of staff shortages on Autistic students, and ensure they are not compromising inclusion are urgently needed. These may include guidelines for schools on supporting students with disability when teacher shortages occur. For example, guidelines may aim to ensure all staff have quick and easy access to critical student information in Disability Inclusion Profiles. Steps should also be taken to improve the capacity and capabilities of Education Support Staff to meet the functional support needs of Autistic students and provide coordinated support to teachers, including through mandatory training and qualification requirements.

5. Support Autistic students and their families experiencing ‘School Can’t’ (including by adopting all recommendations of the Senate Inquiry into School Refusal).

Many Autistic children are disengaged from school and experience School Can’t. The recent Senate inquiry into the national trend of school refusal and related matters found that school refusal (more appropriately referred to as School Can’t) is most commonly experienced by neuro-divergent students and students with mental health conditions, and that it is having a significant impact on these cohorts and their families.^{vi}

Urgent steps are needed to implement all of the evidence informed recommendations of the recent Senate Inquiry. These include that State and Territory Governments improve the early identification of neurodivergence, build the capacity of schools to provide reasonable adjustments and supports, increase the flexibility of education delivery, improve the capacity of schools to support student’s experiencing School Can’t and invest in peer support networks for families.

6. Strengthen outreach, flexible learning options and mental health support for students continuing to be impacted by Covid-19 lockdowns.

Evidence given to the Senate Inquiry into National School Refusal and the Disability Royal Commission, as well as a thematic analysis of calls to our national Autism Connect helpline, demonstrate that many Autistic students have struggled to return to school post lockdowns due to a lack of flexibility and return to school/transition support.

Targeted actions to support Autistic students are required. These should include outreach for Autistic students absent from school, more flexible learning options, standards of support for students learning remotely, increased catch up support for Autistic students and flexible access to mental health and wellbeing support.

The Commonwealth Department of Education is in the process of reviewing the impact of Covid-19 on school students with disability. The review has been informed directly by Autistic students, their families and carers, and the autism sector. Amaze has provided a [submission](#) to the review and the Department's final report will be provided to the Federal Minister for education later this year. We encourage you to review our submission and be guided by the outcomes of the inquiry.

7. Create a Victorian strategy to implement all unanimously agreed recommendations of the Disability Royal Commission.

In its [Final Report](#) (2023), the Disability Royal Commission concluded that students with disability face significant barriers to safe, quality and inclusive education and that major reform is required. It unanimously made 13 recommendations (including numerous sub-recommendations) to address these barriers and foster an inclusive education system for all. These recommendations were informed by comprehensive and robust evidence reviews, as well as the lived experience of many people with disability and their families.

A Victorian Strategy is required to implement all the Commission's unanimously agreed recommendations for inclusive education targeted at state governments, including measures to:

- Ensure equal access to mainstream education and prevent gate keeping practices.
- Prevent the inappropriate use of exclusionary discipline (including exclusion, suspension and expulsion) against students with disability.
- Build school and family understandings of, and access to reasonable adjustments.
- Improve strength-based funding and be transparent about how funding is used.
- Entrench stronger connections between mainstream and non-mainstream schools.
- Improve career guidance and transition support services.
- Strengthen parent-school relationships.
- Establish an inclusive education unit in all state and territory education authorities.
- Improve workforce capabilities, expertise and development, particularly for students with cognitive and intellectual disability.
- Strengthen research and data collection on best practice.
- Provide independent complaints mechanisms.

The Commissioners did not reach unanimous agreement on whether segregated or non-mainstream schools should be phased out over time. However, all Commissioner's did agree that social isolation is decreased, and inclusion is fostered when mainstream and non-mainstream schools are closely co-located, or where there is a connection or partnership between schools.

In its strategy, the Victorian Government should prioritise the creation of partnerships between mainstream and non-mainstream schools, whereby students in non-mainstream schools can access mainstream school programs and have opportunities for learning, social engagement and participation in cultural, sporting, recreational and celebratory activities with their peers in mainstream schools.

Amaze is ready to assist.

Please contact me by email at jim.mullan@amaze.org.au if you have any questions or would like further evidence or information in support of our recommendations.

Yours sincerely,



Jim Mullan
Chief Executive Officer

