



**The
Sycamore
School**
Autism - Friendly Learning



SUBMISSION TO SELECT COMMITTEE ON AUTISM - 2020



Contact

If you have any questions or would like to find out more about this Submission to Select Committee on Autism, please contact:

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Executive Summary

In November 2019, the Senate resolved to establish a Select Committee on Autism to inquire into and report on the services and life outcomes for autistic people in Australia, and the associated need for a National Autism Strategy, with reference to a variety of areas from diagnosis, prevalence, best practice in service provision, to funding models and the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

The Sycamore School welcomes the Senate Inquiry into autism, and the opportunity to submit. For decades, autistic people have required dedicated supports that provide them with the tools and opportunities to fulfil their hopes and aspirations, and lead meaningful and successful lives.

The Sycamore School provides the Committee with an example of success and innovation in the education space for school aged autistic people. While The Sycamore School is still young in its experience, it can speak to the importance of holistic life-long supports that are imperative to supporting autistic people in their journeys toward meeting their goals.

“In the classroom, my son was able to make friendships for the first time. He learned how to be empathetic and he’s come a long way in being able to manage his emotions and self-regulate,”

Parent of child at The Sycamore School

About The Sycamore School

The Sycamore School was opened in 2017 as the first full-time educational program for school aged autistic people in Queensland. The School was opened as a result of an inclusive community engagement exercise that took the aspirations and priorities of hundreds of families and young autistic people around Queensland, as well as the experience of autistic adults to shape and form a philosophy around what the school would work to achieve. Combined with support from the research community on best practice in educating autistic students, The Sycamore School created an inclusive program that addresses the educational disparity many autistic students face by providing access to the National Curriculum in a meaningful and adjusted way, paralleled with an autism-specific curriculum that supports the developmental needs and goals of each student.

The School defines inclusive education as schooling that promotes in students a sense of belonging and being valued as an individual (Goodall, 2018). The School is structured in a manner that allows for the flexibility required by autistic students and their families, as opposed to requiring young people on the autism spectrum to 'fit in' with rigid school procedures and classroom practices.

The Sycamore School's aim is to improve life-outcomes for autistic people through its program, supporting independence in learning, and focuses heavily on self-advocacy skills to support our students to engage with our communities with a sense of pride and with confidence.

The Sycamore School is something the autism community in Queensland has been looking for for sometime. The Sycamore School aims to support those families and students who have not been able to engage in education successfully, or have not had positive schooling experiences. The result is evident in the educational progress our students make, the levels of engagement with learning we experience in our classrooms, as well as the developmental gains many of our students have made. Our students take responsibility for their goal setting, and using the self-advocacy skills we teach, are learning to take control around their independence.

The Sycamore School's impact has been immeasurable and unrivalled. Now in its fourth year, The Sycamore School supports 89 autistic students and their families. The School has evolved into a community of support for the students' families with new friendships being fostered everyday. For some of our families, access to The Sycamore School has resulted in re-engagement with their careers and the workplace, the ability to take up study, improved relationships among their social networks, and improved relationships with their autistic children.


Since it's inception, there has been a community of need waiting to be a part of The Sycamore School community, and our strategic intent is to support as many of these families as possible. Our strategic plan focuses on three pillars: Evidence, Growth and Sustainability.

Evidence: We use research and evidence to inform our decision making and to support the evolution and evaluation of our programs.

Growth: We understand the needs of our community, and work to support them with services that align with their needs and aspirations.

Sustainability: We work internally on ensuring our systems and processes are aligned with our strategic objectives and that we continually look for ways to improve on how we deliver.






“Our students take responsibility for their goal setting, and using the self-advocacy skills we teach, are learning to take control around their independence.”

The Sycamore School

Our Recommendations

Our recommendations to the Senate Committee are:

- NDIS funds are made available for school provided supports which are covered under the NDIS. For example: Speech Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Psychology, and Transition to Employment/Tertiary Study supports.
- There is a nation-wide training program for educators on evidence based educational and developmental practices to positively support autistic students, for implementation in all schools.
- Dedicated programs/initiatives to address the poor educational and employment outcomes for autistic people.
- A review of the funding models for Independent Special Schools to provide additional funds that support school-wide initiatives currently unfunded.



“At our previous school, I was the parent of That kid, but here, I’m the parent of a kid who’s just like all the other kids in the class. I’m so comfortable here.”

Parent of child at The Sycamore School

Response to Inquiry Terms of Reference

Current approaches and barriers to consistent, timely and best practice autism diagnosis

We recognise and advocate that people seeking a diagnosis of autism have the opportunity and the means to do so, supported by timely access, diagnosticians who have the relevant expertise, and post-diagnostic supports that assist with working with the NDIS to organise plans. We advocate for this regardless of the age which diagnosis is being sought. While there has been a focus on young children accessing early intervention, this is equally important for adolescents and adults seeking a diagnosis, particularly females.

The prevalence of autism in Australia

We agree with the findings provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in the 2015 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (SDAC). The SDAC states that there are 164,000 people in Australia with autism or 1 in 150 people. This is a broad prevalence figure that does not acknowledge that the incidence of autism can vary according to factors such as age, gender, and also from state to state. It is important to recognise the array of data and investigation into prevalence, yet how little can be certain about it.

Misdiagnosis and under representation of females in autism data, and gender bias in autism assessment and support services

We acknowledge that females with autism have been underrepresented in diagnosis data, and consequently in assessment and support services. Historically, there has been a 4:1 ratio in diagnosis between males and females, resulting in much of the research and best practice aligned with the needs of males on the autism spectrum. Our understanding of the characteristics of autism is now also being shaped by the differing characteristics displayed between males and females, leading to advocacy efforts for the recognition of innate differences between genders (Van Wijngaarden-Cremers, P.J.M, et.al 2013).

International best practice with regards to diagnosis, support services and education, effectiveness, cost and required intensity

We applaud the efforts of the Autism CRC and the NDIA for their establishment of the National Guidelines for Assessment and Diagnosis of Autism. This initiative has ensured that there is a nationally consistent way in which autism is diagnosed, supporting a national framework for access to supports under the NDIS.


Like many in the autism community, we celebrate the introduction of the NDIS and the overall positive impacts it has had for autistic people who otherwise would have limited access to supports. However, it is important to appreciate and respect the challenges many participants and their families have faced in their interactions with the NDIS, access to appropriate planning supports, and providers who are participant focused. We advocate for the continuous review and evaluation of the NDIS and the improvement of services particularly for autistic people seeking a diagnosis or support.

The demand for and adequacy of Commonwealth, state and local government services to meet the needs of autistic people at all life stages

The introduction of the NDIS has increased access to support particularly for those in early intervention, and those in adulthood transitioning from education to employment, as well as those who require lifestyle and accommodation supports. A focus for many advocacy groups has been in early intervention support pathways and employment pathways, with little attention given to those important formative years in education. We advocate that supports for ALL life stages are given adequate attention and while the NDIS does not support education, it is indeed an important time in the life of any individual under the scheme.

“The staff are so caring and supportive of both the children and their families and they should be congratulated for their dedication and enthusiasm for creating a fabulous learning environment.”

Parent of child at The Sycamore School



The interaction between services provided by the Commonwealth, state and local governments, including:

- health and mental health,
- education,
- employment,
- justice, and
- housing.

For organisations who exist in the industries which the NDIS does not interact, providing holistic supports to participants has been a challenge. The Sycamore School prides itself on providing a holistic approach to supporting students with autism, and currently employs a number of school wide supports that align with the provisions of the NDIS. These include supports such as Speech Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Wellbeing and Independent Living Skills, Social Work and Mental Health supports. Clearly, these supports fit with the service provisions under the NDIS yet, our families are not able to build these school supports into their packages, nor can the school receive any financial support for these unique school based services from the NDIS. The premise for the NDIS is to encourage participants to work towards their goals, and engage with their communities with independence through support – for a school aged autistic child, these goals are formative and developmental, and their community in which they learn independence is their school community. For a school dedicated to supporting autistic students there is an opportunity to provide appropriately funded and structured supports in an educational setting aimed at addressing educational disparity and improved employment outcomes.

The adequacy and efficacy of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) for autistic people, including:

a) autism understanding within the NDIS,

The experience of some people with autism and their families has been that employees of the NDIS do not have a reasonable level of understanding about autism, and how best to interact and communicate with autistic people and their families. It is important that employees of the NDIS, Local Area Co-ordinators, and Support Co-ordinators have the necessary expertise to best support and engage with autistic people and their families. This includes understanding about autism, the challenges autistic people may have with communication and social communication, the level of knowledge families and support networks have about services as well as their capacity to advocate.

b) the adequacy and appropriateness of supports to empower autistic people to participate in the NDIS planning process, and exercise self-determination through choice and control over their support services.

We advocate for and support the importance of self-advocacy and self-determination for autistic people. This is an important skill we instil in our students at The Sycamore School and just as we expect they will be able to engage with the NDIS in this way into the future, we similarly involve them in goal setting and planning for their educational and developmental progress. By empowering students to describe their wants, needs and challenges, our teaching teams are able to develop meaningful and effective teaching and learning strategies for individuals, and through this, further their own pedagogical practices (Zuber & Webber, 2019). The impact of this approach has been extremely positive, resulting in students taking ownership of the goals they set, and responsibility for their effort and progress. It would be a highly valuable skill the NDIS could promote and support for autistic adults in particular, who have not had the opportunities students at The Sycamore School receive.

The development of a National Autism Strategy and its interaction with the next phase of the National Disability Strategy

The National Disability Strategy (NDS) aimed at addressing the UN Convention of Rights of People with a Disability, specifically addresses areas for improvement and priorities for the Federal Government from 2010 – 2020. While there have been a number of initiatives introduced in that time, we find that efforts in the past ten years, even with the introduction of the NDIS, have not led to notable progress, particularly with regard to Outcome 5 Learning and Skills.

It is evident that there are some notable benefits in having a strategy aimed specifically at supporting the autistic population. This comes as a consequence of the broader focus of the NDS in addressing the general population of people with a disability, and overlooking the particularly poor outcomes of the autistic population compared with the general population of people with a disability.

Response to Inquiry Terms of Reference

Areas in Outcome 5 Learning and Skills in the current NDS where we advocate for review include:

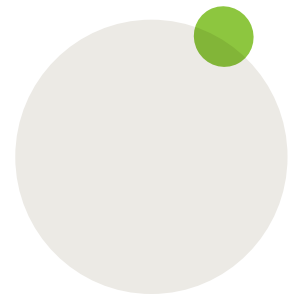
The current NDS looks to achieve outcomes where our education is inclusive, and we have a high performing education system responsive to autistic students' needs. In the ten years since the NDS was implemented we have not seen improvements in the educational attainment levels for autistic students, and the numbers of students whose developmental and academic needs are unmet also remains unchanged. Additionally, key research bodies and studies provide guidance in best practice which includes an autism-specific curriculum aimed at addressing the developmental needs of autistic students (Roberts, 2016). This has not been available to autistic students in Australia except in specialist settings such as The Sycamore School. As education was consciously detached from the NDIS, the implication is that recipients are unable to receive a coordinated program capable of responding to individual needs (Whitburn, Moss & O'Mara, 2017) It is imperative that mainstream schools are provided with the means, support, and expertise to provide parallel curriculums alongside academic curriculums in order to meet the needs of autistic students. With 90% of the Australian autistic population aged 5-14 years of age, this is imperative to the quality of life and outcomes for this cohort in the coming decades (ABS, SDAC 2015).

a) **Policy Direction 1** in the current NDS focuses on the skilling capability of education providers. As a school providing specialist support for autistic students, we are constantly looking for ways to increase the capacity of our educators and support staff. Where the NDS focuses on the general population of people with a disability, we must acknowledge that with most of the Australian autistic population is under the age of 25 years old, and there is a responsibility to ensure that those who teach these students have the resources and expertise to do so, and we advocate that this should be a focus for the NDS into the future (AIHW, 2017).

The approach needs to be relevant and meaningful - not simply a matter of providing staff with the technical skills required to teach and manage autistic students (typical of current training opportunities), but also building their professional capacity to manage the increased workload associated with the inclusion of autistic students. (See Boujut, Popa-Roche, Palomares et al., 2017).

b) **Policy Direction 2** in the NDS focuses on reducing disparity in educational outcomes. The NDS acknowledges the notable disparity in educational attainment for the general population of people with a disability, but does not take into account that the autistic population are especially marginalised. The disparity in educational attainment in the autistic student population is under-researched, and therefore poorly understood. Nevertheless, as the learning profiles of autistic students are highly unique, often complex, and variable over time, improving academic outcomes requires the use of individualised learning plans alongside school environments able to mobilise specialist support, school wide and individual interventions (Watkins, Ledbetter-Cho & O'Reilly, 2019; Whitby & Mancil, 2009). According to Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data, the autistic student population are less likely to complete educational attainment in years 10-12, and are less likely to engage and succeed in post-school study at any level. This shows the distinct challenges autistic people face, and the necessary specialist and focused strategies required to ensure that they are provided with supports that are meaningful in supporting positive outcomes.

c) **Policy Direction 4** in the NDS intends to improve pathways for people with disability from school to employment and lifelong learning, however, people with a disability including those with autism continue to experience low post-school study participation and high unemployment rates. It is well recognised that people on the autism spectrum have made important contributions to society, however, future contribution will be contingent on the capacity of the community to i) remove existing barriers to postsecondary success, and ii) identification of new models of service delivery and partnerships to better equip young people for an independent adulthood (Nasamran, Witmer & Los, 2017; Wehman, Schall, Carr et al., 2014). This is an important goal and has a compounding result in the unemployment statistics. Again, autistic people are particularly marginalised in ABS unemployment data showing that they are more likely to be unemployed compared with the general population of people with a disability. It is important therefore, that targeted and specialised programs and initiatives to support young autistic people during their years in education are provided. The Sycamore School advocates strongly for funding that is aligned with addressing this issue, both through education and disability portfolios.



The adequacy of funding for research into autism

We advocate and support funding into research specifically in the education of autistic students. Much research has been focused on investigating what doesn't work, and unpacking negative experiences autistic students have in educational settings. Only a small proportion of autism research funding is typically allocated to education projects (den Houting & Pellicano 2019), the consequence of which is significant knowledge gaps in relation to effective education environments, and the promotion of evidenced based practices untested in Australian contexts. Furthermore, the field of autism research has only recently begun to meaningfully address a frustrating research to practice gap by acknowledging the need to forge research partnerships with the autism community and through more participatory methodologies (Fletcher-Watson, Adams, Brook et al., 2019; Guldberg, 2017; Parsons, Charman, Faulkner et al., 2013; Pellicano, Mandy, Bölte et al., 2019).

As in other fields, there are community expectations that autism research must demonstrate the impact of its educational interventions and promoted supports if schools are to confidently resource evidence-based practices. Few published research studies have methodologies or capacities to link interventions to improvement in later life outcomes for autistic people. There are practical, theoretical and methodological challenges that limit the capacity of research to achieve its impact (Elsabbagh, Yusuf, Prasanna et al., 2014).

We support research that is positive, practical and outcomes focused, that supports the development and evolution of teaching practices, educational frameworks and pedagogical approaches which foster independence in learning, development and self-advocacy. The Sycamore School has recently embarked on a five year Research Strategy, using a university partnership model to support key research agendas and outcomes through seed projects. Elsewhere in the world, education systems are working towards improving schools by building staff capacity to engage in and with research involving significant cultural shifts for school leaders and classroom teachers (Godfrey & Brown, 2019). While we have taken the lead from this international trend, our approach to research engagement also accounts for the challenges that are currently confronting the field of autism and education (above dot points). Consequently, we believe we are at the vanguard of research engaged schools in Australia by addressing concerns related to: increasing the professional capacity of staff to respond meaningfully to autistic students; collaborative efforts to bridge the autism research to practice gap; and improving school accountability to the community it serves.

The School's adoption of a research strategy emerged from a genuine desire to improve autistic students' experience and outcomes of schooling by changing 1) the way its staff engaged in and with autism research, and 2) researchers' engagement with the autistic community. The purpose of the Research Strategy is to ensure a meaningful evidenced-based approach is central to supporting the School's growth and in sustaining the quality and evolution of its program. This is an innovative approach to long-term partnering with universities that has substantial mutual benefit including the generation of research findings and insights that are both rigorous and relevant to the autism community as well as to The Sycamore School itself.

The social inclusion and participation of autistic people within the economy and community

While we have seen great initiatives in the employment of autistic people in technology roles through organisations like Specialisterne, Xceptional, and The Dandelion Program, we are yet to see initiatives that promote the employment of autistic people in other industries. Additionally, while diversity in the workplace has become a successful corporate initiative, and employers can seek support from the NDIS in making adjustments for autistic people in their organisations, the broader inclusion of autistic employees into the fabric of an organisation and into leadership levels is yet to improve. We encourage the ongoing work and development of programs in this space into the future.

The capacity and sustainability of advocacy, self-advocacy and self-determination supports for autistic people, including mechanisms to self-represent to government as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

We advocate for and support opportunities for autistic people to self-advocate and this should be supported with programs and initiatives. This would allow autistic people to develop the skills to advocate in all areas of our community, including representation to government.

"I am overwhelmingly proud of the huge progress a young person in my class has made in their reading."

Teacher at The Sycamore School

Response to Inquiry Terms of Reference

Other Related Matters.

The Funding Model for Independent Special Schools, and its interaction with the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD)

Prior to the introduction of the NCCD and its role in determining per student funding, Independent Special Schools received a blanket loading per student to support the specialist school-wide supports, programs, curriculums, staff development and training, staffing levels and equipment required to provide marginalised students with opportunities to learn and develop. This loading was provided regardless of the level of need of the student, and was based on census numbers only. The loading was 223% of the base federal government funding per student.

The Model for the NCCD was progressively implemented over the period 2013–2015. A Senate elect committee was appointed to support the Government with recommendations with regards to funding supports for students with disabilities. One of the recommendations which was adopted was a needs-based funding model that followed the student regardless of which school they attended, and that NCCD data collected from 2013 to 2017 would inform what the funding levels would be.

NCCD was not linked to funding until 1st January 2018 and the 2018 August census for NCCD was the first time that the new funding model was used.

Since the implementation of and in accordance with the NCCD guidelines, Independent Special Schools (including The Sycamore School) have lost a considerable amount of funding, given that funding amounts are now determined on the needs of the student, rather than by providing an amount for all students attending the specialist setting to cover school-wide supports.

We agree with the philosophical viewpoint that all students with a disability should have access to necessary funding aligned with their individual needs regardless of which school they attend. However, it is important to acknowledge that Independent Special Schools require further support given the nature of the setting, in that all student who attend are diagnosed with a disability.

The primary impact from this funding change is not only the introduction of levels of funding, but the loss of a loading that was specific to Independent Special Schools.

There is currently no dedicated federal funding for Independent Special Schools, and we advocate for change in the current models to support this.

Funding and Support for the Well-being of Staff in Independent Special Schools

A fundamental part of the success of The Sycamore School is the School's Board, School Leadership Team, Administration, Education, Allied Health, Wellbeing, and Support staff.

Their commitment to improving the life outcomes of the young people who attend our school is unwavering, but can be taxing to their physical and emotional wellbeing. The challenging behaviours that some students exhibit from time to time, create high levels of stress and anxiety for staff.

The Sycamore School has implemented from its own resources, intensive efforts to ensure that our staff are supported professionally, and personally, in delivering meaningful learning experiences. Some examples of the supports implemented across the School are (but not limited to):

- Access to a full-time Social Worker onsite.
- Access to an Employee Assistance Program.
- Debriefs and emotional supports – approximately 2.5 hours per day is spent supporting staff in this space.
- Additional Support Staff – currently 8-10 staff members float around the school providing additional support.
- Professional Support Plan – Each year staff are required to engage in creating a Professional Support Plan. This is supported by a Deputy Principal who meets with staff individually to assist them creating goals around improving their practice, and enhancing their emotional wellbeing.

The School leadership and Board are currently considering programs that support building resilience, emotional intelligence, critical incident debriefing, and stress reduction techniques working in a challenging environment.

It is imperative that our leadership and staff have access and are developed in these areas to ensure that their capacity to deliver the program is effective and sustainable. Currently these types of resources for staff and schools are not funded, however are necessary and important in providing the level of support our young people require. To date, the current measures have been adequate, however, as the school grows and staff tenure increases, more robust programs need to be implemented, and our financial capacity to engage with these programs is limited. Therefore, we advocate for funded support for the implementation and monitoring of these programs.

“It’s people with autism who can change our world and I feel like I’m contributing to that.”

Social Worker at The Sycamore School



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