

What is needed to help schools succeed?

As parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), our collective experience mirrors that described in the SE review discussion document:

- a number of schools support our children's learning well,
- some rely heavily on parental involvement in both time and resources;
- some fail to provide the level of support required for measurable learning to occur; and unfortunately
- a significant number still actively discourage enrolment.

It is well recognised the number of children diagnosed as having ASD has increased in recent years, and it is our experience that even very supportive schools struggle to meet the educational needs of our children.

It is our opinion that what is good for ASD kids is good for all children and there are 5 key aspects to special education that will help schools succeed and raise educational outcomes for all children with special needs:

1. needs based assessment processes for children with disabilities;
2. funding tagged to **all** children with a disability;
3. better access to **proven** specialist support;
4. flexibility within school clusters to pool and/or transfer resources and knowledge; and
5. innovative teaching practise that recognises different ways of learning.

Autism is one of those conditions that challenges all our preconceptions about disability and children with autism are disadvantaged by the current assessment tools that determine funding support. Some children may not have a recognised intellectual disability but are not safe in classroom because of sensory integration issues, many who speak are assumed ok yet fail to learn to read or write at even the most basic level, and some with no verbal communication at all are able to articulate themselves but only with assisted communication technology. For these reasons and many more, **assessment and the subsequent educational support should be determined on the basis of individual need, not a set of paper based criteria.**

All special needs funding should be pooled so that all children with a disability have tagged funding. The SE grant should be abolished. It serves neither low nor high decile schools well. Tagged funding will help minimise the number of families discouraged from enrolling their children, and will recognise the great work done by a number of schools that currently welcome special needs children. It is also our opinion that all other funding targeted to support children in the classroom (as distinct from professional development programmes for staff for example) be pooled. The artificial benchmarks set between each funding pool, ORRS vs SLS etc, mean many children miss out altogether.

Schools should be given the mandate and resources to access the specialist services they need, not just the services the Ministry of Education has to offer. They should also have the support to share their knowledge and expertise. Those schools that support ASD children well have spent many years building capacity within their schools, and many have done so by bringing in expertise outside of the Ministry of Education. Unfortunately this expertise often goes to waste if and when those children leave. School clusters have been used very effectively to share knowledge, as well as good teaching and management practise; sharing special education practise should be no different.

The level of teacher education and awareness regarding the learning needs of children with disabilities, and ASD children in particular, is woefully inadequate. With statistics stating as many as 1 in 150 children on the autism spectrum, it is not unreasonable to suggest all teachers can expect to have children with autism in their classrooms. Yet there is no mandatory requirement to have even a basic understanding of ASD. **Given the prevalence of ASD it is our opinion that all teachers, aides, and principals in New Zealand have access to training and further professional development in teaching methods that support children with ASD.** It is also our view that a dedicated ASD specialist unit within the Ministry of Education be formed to support this. Ideas as to what this may look like are covered in questions 6 through 10.

How could schools work together to succeed?

Some schools will always be better than others at supporting the needs of ASD children, and school clusters are an obvious vehicle to share teaching practise and resources for principals, teachers and teacher aides. They also provide a professional support network, the benefits of which should not be underestimated, particularly for teacher aides who have less direct access to specialist advice or counsel.

There is also no reason why schools couldn't jointly fund specialist support services such as behavioural therapists, or activities such as music, drama, or play therapy. These are also great opportunities to focus on life skills and social skills in an environment suited to the child's needs.

Children with ASD expend a great deal of energy trying to cope in mainstream classrooms and "fitting in". Having the opportunity to have a learning environment tailored to their needs, even if only for a few hours a week, would improve learning and show teachers, aides, and their peers what they can achieve in optimal conditions that recognise their different learning styles.

Dedicated funding for professional development of teacher aides is essential. With large class sizes the norm, combined with the fact that the majority of special needs children are mainstreamed, our teachers are stretched. The reality is children who are supported by aides in the classroom get very little one on one teacher time. Therefore the role of the aide becomes pivotal to the educational success, or otherwise, of those children. A team of experienced, knowledgeable teacher aides is a great asset for any school and is a resource that can also be shared.

These are just a couple of cost effective examples of how clusters could work, and their potential to improve learning outcomes.

What needs to be done to make transitions work better?

Secured funding does not ensure transition success. It is essential that all involved have a real understanding of the students needs and that planning ensures the right services and supports are in place before the transition. Prior to transition, there must be a face to face, needs based assessment undertaken and resources allocated accordingly. There are readily available international examples of this such as the UK needs assessment statement which could be easily adapted for a New Zealand setting.

Transition success could be reviewed at IEPs, with perhaps further needs assessments every 3-4 years once the child is settled. If the child's initial assessment suggests their level of disability is unlikely to improve there may not be the need to review as frequently. A needs based assessment would more likely ensure:

- More than the typical number of visits to the new environment so there is a better chance for the student and teaching team to become familiar;

- Greater innovation regarding the services and supports that are available;
- Better communication between teachers/teacher aides/schools and families. If potential problems are addressed early there is a greater chance of there being fewer problems in the future;
- Teachers and teacher aides are more proactive in their teaching practise as professional development needs and specialist support have already been identified;
- All involved are more likely to take a shared responsibility to work effectively and collaboratively to achieve the best possible outcome; **and as importantly;**
- **A culture of helping others within a class through raised awareness and understanding.**

How could services be better coordinated and focused on the needs of students and families?

The success of a special needs child at school is heavily reliant on the support of their family, and this is particularly true for children with ASD. A significant number of parents give up work or work part time as they are the only person available to aide their children in the classroom. Many parents are often the only resource schools can draw on for “hands on” experience with ASD children, or even an understanding of the condition. Some do not mind – they want to see their children succeed but it does place an unnecessary and unfair burden on parents of special needs children.

The need for, and development of, the ASD guidelines are an obvious example that service co-ordination has not been addressed for this group, and that a child’s development should not be limited by the ability of families to access services they are entitled too.

As mentioned in the previous question there should be a needs based assessment process to determine the level of support required, and an obvious mode of delivery would be with the appointment of a needs assessment service co-ordinator (NASC). This would mean more consistency and make it easier for parents, their children and schools to get the support they need. It may also mean that with greater efficiency services may be established earlier when they are greatly needed rather than families struggling on their own.

This would not necessarily be a role within the Ministry, in fact it may be more beneficial to contract the assessment work to NGOs and other agencies that specialise in supporting the needs of a particular community, and co-ordination of support and resources to those who specialise in the co-ordination of services.

What arrangements for funding, decision making, verification, and fund holding should we have?

Funding needs to be tagged to the child based on a face to face, needs based assessment process. Verification should be undertaken in the same manner described in question 2 – as and when required. A significant part of the verification process should include how well the child functions or is expected to function in their educational setting. **Both the assessment and verification process should be undertaken by those that have proven “hands on” experience of working with children with special needs, or that particular condition.**

Alongside a needs based assessment and verification process, we believe there is an urgent requirement for the development of a specialist ASD unit within the Ministry.

There is enough statistical and anecdotal evidence to support this conclusion as the number of children diagnosed with autism continues to rise as do the complaints that these children are unfairly discriminated against within current funding regime.

Current funding mechanisms actively exclude many ASD children from the funding support they need just to attend school, let alone reach their potential. Furthermore those from lower socio economic backgrounds are at an even greater disadvantage as it seems who writes a funding application is as much a determinant of success as the level of need. This is totally unacceptable.

Once need has been established, and the assessment focus could be as simple as “what is required for this child to access the curriculum”, funding should be tagged to the child. Schools will then have the flexibility to access the resources needed with the support of the NASC, and if that service is not well developed in that region, the specialist ASD unit within the Ministry.

Our schools have for a long time now been given a large amount of discretion as to how to allocate operational grants. There is no reason why, with support, schools cannot do the same with funding to support children with special needs.

With the establishment of a needs based assessment model there will be:

- little need to have different eligibility criteria and different funding arrangements;
- less children will fall through the cracks;
- a much clearer picture of the level of need, and
- greater understanding of which targeted services and support are in greatest demand.

How can individually targeted services and supports be made more efficient? Is the current mix of services and support right and does it provide value for money? What changes would you suggest?

The balance between specialist services and support within the classroom has been a constant challenge for schools and families seeking better educational outcomes for their children. Many families give generously of their time and resources to keep their children in school because there is not adequate funding to support their children in the classroom. With regard to access of ASD specialist services, it is our collective experience that with a few notable exceptions (example RTLBs and OTs) the specialist services offered by the Ministry are of little use to schools at best, and unfortunately in many instances a waste of money.

The variability of issues and complexity of ASD mean only those that have significant experience working with children with ASD, add value. It has been our experience that the advisory services offered by the Ministry do not include specialist knowledge of the condition, implementation of learning strategies is ineffective as no time is allowed for training for teachers or aides, and there is little follow up. IEPs tend to become a “tick the box” exercise.

Schools build capacity to support ASD children quickly and efficiently – they have to, otherwise the learning of all children is compromised. The following is just some of the ways the mix of services and support can be optimised:

1. Autism specialists are essential - not generalists.
2. With regard to assisted communication technology, equipment needs to be leased not bought to keep up to date.
3. ASD training is essential for teacher aides as well as teachers.
4. Behavioural intervention which is regular is essential. This need not be expensive but could be delivered by trained teacher aides following a program. It could also be contracted out to a local approved provider.
5. Only those that work regularly with a child need attend IEPs – it is our understanding much of the MoE specialist support allocated under ORRS is to attend IEPs – in our view this is an unnecessary and wasteful expense.

As schools build expertise in supporting ASD children so does their ability to maximise efficiency gains as school cluster groupings could pool resources for a demographic area.

How can families and schools be better informed?

There is currently too little emphasis on the academic achievement of educational outcomes for special needs children, individually or as a group. Behaviour management is often the focus, and generally schools and teachers have low expectations of what special needs children can achieve. In particular, children with autism often have behavioural problems, driven by their sensory needs, which lead schools to assume incorrectly that the children have limited cognitive capacity.

The introduction of national standards could potentially be valuable for students with ASD because they focus schools' attention on, and make them accountable for, the core skills of literacy and numeracy. We do not know what the literacy rate of children with ASD is, but suspect it is much lower than it should be.

Whilst it could be assumed ORRS funded students would not be assessed under national standards there are likely to be exceptions as ASD students are as likely to be ORRS funded for behavioural reasons as for lack of cognitive ability. However, non-ORRS students with ASD who have great difficulty with reading but function well in other areas, could be disadvantaged by being expected to perform at the level of the national standards. They could spend their entire school years failing to achieve the national standards, even if they are doing well according to their own potential and abilities.

What does successful special education look like and how should we measure it?

The special education student population has a great deal of variation in ability and potential. The population can be broken down into distinct groups, and students within each group should be able to advance at their own pace and level. It is the Ministry's responsibility to define those groups and the most effective way to support each of them with its specialist services.

We would argue that children with ASD are a distinct group with unique characteristics, and that on the whole this group is not achieving its potential.

Whether it is a specialist unit within the Ministry or contracted services outside, the goal of special education should be much more focused on improving the progress made by these groups of students. By having baseline data about the achievement levels of different groups of special needs students, they could then develop specific interventions and strategies aimed at those groups and support teaching methods that recognise different ways of learning. The specialists would then be held to account for agreed levels of progress.

Again we advise caution with the application of national standards for this group for the reasons outlined in question 7, and assessment under national standards would need to be on a case by case basis.

When things do not go well, what arrangements should be in place to resolve issues?

It is good that an expanded formal process to resolve problems has been suggested. It is also good that the ministry is using the complaints data it has already collected to improve the resolution process.

Conflict is difficult to manage, and firstly arrangements should depend on the nature of the issue. Not every issue needs to go through a formal resolution process. If a school or support provider comes up with ways to address an issue raised, and progress is made, then that is a good outcome. However, if a parent feels that there is an issue with the school or

support provider, then they have the information available to follow the formal resolution process if informal avenues do not resolve it.

Any investigation, mediation and resolution process should not be a lengthy one. If it is lengthy, then the child and others involved in supporting this child suffer. For non-English speaking parents, interpreter services should be funded by the Ministry, and families should have the opportunity to have advocates present. If there are going to be delays in resolving an issue, then some sort of temporary relief funding and help for the child and the family in the meantime will be beneficial.

We believe an independent ombudsman approach is an effective way of ensuring the voice of parents and children are heard, however there needs to be procedures in place to ensure resolution and complaint outcomes are monitored and adhered to.

What is the most important change that would improve outcomes for children and young people with special educations needs.

For many this submission process will be about where children are taught rather than how they are taught and it is probably worthwhile identifying what doesn't work for our children.

Firstly it is our belief and personal experience that children can learn in a variety of settings, and therefore we are not in favour of compulsory mainstreaming. Secondly we do not believe, and have considerable anecdotal evidence to support the view children with ASD are not well served by current funding regimes. We also believe that poorly implemented advisory services are neither an efficient use of limited resources, nor effective at improving learning outcomes for children with special needs.

Another point we would like to make is the discussion has been almost exclusively based around school, and how children are best supported at school. In writing this submission we have endeavoured to focus our discussion within that framework. **However in our view, one of the greatest changes that could be made to improve outcomes for ASD children would be to invest in child focussed intensive early intervention.** All the literature across multiple disciplines agrees with this point, and whilst the development of the ASD guidelines acknowledges this, we as parents have yet to see it put into practise.

However this discussion is not framed within that term of reference, and as an introduction to this submission we identified 5 key changes that we believe will improve learning outcomes for all children with special needs. However if we had to distil those 5 further it would be:

- funding based on individual need, and
- a much greater focus on proven innovative teaching practise that recognises different ways of learning.

We hope all the recommendations and suggestions included this submission address these key issues.

Thank you for this opportunity to have our concerns raised and our ideas heard.

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