

# ISA SUBMISSION TO NATIONAL AUTISM STRATEGY DISCUSSION PAPER

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## 1. ABOUT ISA

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Independent Schools Australia (ISA) is the national peak body representing the Independent school sector. It comprises the eight state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs). Through these Associations, ISA represents more than 1,209 schools and 688,638 students, accounting for 17 per cent of Australian school enrolments.

ISA's major role is to bring the unique needs and contributions of Independent schools to the attention of the Australian Government and to represent the sector on national issues.

Independent schools are a diverse group of non-government schools serving a range of different communities. Many Independent schools provide a religious or values-based education. Others promote a specific educational philosophy or interpretation of mainstream education. A number of Independent schools have been established by community groups seeking to meet particular needs or to reflect the religious values of a community. Independent Catholic schools are a significant part of the sector, accounting for eight per cent of the Independent sector's enrolments.

Independent schools include:

- Schools affiliated with Christian denominations for example, Anglican, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Uniting Church, Quaker and Seventh Day Adventist schools
- Non-denominational Christian schools
- Islamic schools
- Jewish schools
- Montessori schools
- Rudolf Steiner schools
- Schools constituted under specific Acts of Parliament, such as grammar schools in some states
- Community schools
- Indigenous community schools
- Schools that specialise in meeting the needs of students with disabilities
- Schools that cater for students at severe educational risk due to a range of social/emotional/behavioural and other factors.

Most Independent schools are set up and governed independently on an individual school basis. However, some Independent schools with common aims and educational philosophies are governed

and administered as systems, for example Lutheran schools. Systemic schools account for 20 per cent of schools in the Independent sector. Four out of five schools in the sector are autonomous non-systemic schools.

## 2. ABOUT THIS SUBMISSION

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ISA prepared this submission in response to the Australian Government's National Autism Strategy Discussion Paper.

ISA consulted with the state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs) in preparing this submission.

## 3. INTRODUCTION

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### 3.1 Background

The Australian Government launched the Australian Disability Strategy (ADS) 2021-31<sup>1</sup> in 2021, emphasising inclusivity and equal participation for people with disabilities. Under the Strategy, all levels of government are committed to collaborating with disability communities, businesses, and non-government sectors to implement the ADS and create an inclusive Australian society.

In 2019, the Senate established the Select Committee on Autism to investigate services, support, and life outcomes for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The Committee released its final report in March 2022, recommending the development of a person and family-centred National Autism Strategy (the Strategy).

The Strategy is intended to align with Australia's commitments under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities<sup>2</sup> (UN CRPD) to protect, promote, and realise the human rights of Autistic individuals and address intersectional disadvantage and discrimination based on attributes like Aboriginality, age, disability, ethnicity, gender identity, race, religion, and sexual orientation.

### 3.2 Students with Disability in the Independent School Sector

Data on students with disability in schools is collected nationally through the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (the NCCD). The Independent sector educates approximately 143,500 students with disability.<sup>3</sup> ISA estimates that close to 90% of students with disability in the Independent sector attend mainstream schools.

There are also 3,472 students enrolled in 47 special schools and 13,100 students in 96 special assistance schools. The data indicates that a significant majority of students that require extensive levels of adjustment attend a non-mainstream Independent school such as a special school or special assistance school. A number of the special schools in the Independent sector are set up specifically to provide education to students with Autism.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dss.gov.au/disability-and-australias-disability-strategy-2021-2031>

<sup>2</sup> <https://social.desa.un.org/issues/disability/crpd/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-crpd>

<sup>3</sup> ISA estimate based on ABS Schools Australia enrolment data and ACARA NCCD data.

The NCCD collects information from schools on the level of adjustment required by students and category of disability, but it does not collect information related to specific diagnoses. This means that ISA does not have data on the exact number of Autistic students enrolled in the Independent sector. As noted above, Autistic students will be in both mainstream schools and specialist settings such as special assistance schools and special schools.

## 4. RECOMMENDATIONS

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ISA supports a National Autism Strategy that contributes to a greater understanding of ASD within our communities. Addressing the multifaceted and individual challenges faced by many Autistic students requires early diagnosis and access to appropriate interventions, inclusive education practices, upskilling of both our current and future education workforce and greater awareness of ASD within the broader community.

Our proposed recommendations underscore the importance of increasing accessible support services and improving measures that collectively aim to provide tailored support and promote awareness and understanding of ASD within educational settings. ISA believes that a one-size-fits-all approach is neither effective nor appropriate, as every Autistic student is individual and has different needs, strengths and challenges, however a national approach could greatly assist in addressing some of the challenges faced by students, families and schools.

Independent Schools Australia makes the following recommendations in support of a National Autism Strategy to provide supportive, inclusive and quality educational experiences for all Autistic students:

- Develop a nationwide approach that supports equitable opportunities to access quality education and support services for all Autistic students, and continued collaboration between policymakers, healthcare professionals, educators, and communities.
- Increase the allied health workforce to provide more capacity for health professionals to work closely with education settings and provide ongoing support to Autistic students.
- Address challenges to increase capacity and ASD knowledge in the education workforce with pre-service and ongoing training and knowledge development to provide quality outcomes for Autistic students.
- Increased funding for AISs to provide specialised ASD consultancy support and professional training to Independent schools to support Autistic students.
- Increase support and resources for teachers to work with Autistic students and their families so that student and family voice in relation to engagement at school (social, emotional, behavioural, learning) can help inform adjustments and accommodations.
- Examples of best practice and resources to support Autistic students in daily transitions, and more importantly support for significant transitions for Autistic students between home and early childhood, early childhood to school, school to tertiary study or work pathways.
- Improved resources and support for Autistic students in regional and remote communities and for schools educating highly disadvantaged students.
- Advice, consultancy services and funding for schools to create Autistic-friendly sensory environments and to retrofit current educational settings.

- Creation of programs and awareness campaigns to develop more inclusive cultures within our communities, developed and informed by extensive consultations with Autistic people and their families.
- Further investment in Autism Spectrum Disorder research to assist in informed decision-making and the development of effective interventions.

## 5. EDUCATING AUTISTIC STUDENTS

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### 5.1 Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition which may affect social skills, communication skills and life skills. It is a lifelong disorder that can also affect sensory inputs and how an individual interacts with their environment. While Australia has made notable progress in supporting individuals with ASD and their families, several hurdles persist. These may include difficulties related to the access and cost of diagnostic services, access to appropriate interventions and therapies, the provision of inclusive education, employment opportunities, and societal understanding and acceptance.

The prevalence of ASD in Australia is estimated to affect about 1 in 70 Australians, with this number on the rise.<sup>4</sup> In the past, misdiagnosis and misunderstanding of ASD were common, leading to limited data on the condition's prevalence. However, improved diagnostic criteria and increased awareness have allowed for more accurate identification of ASD.

Factors that have contributed to the increasing prevalence of ASD in Australia include broadened diagnostic criteria and improved support services, a heightened awareness of the disorder and genetic and environmental factors. It is worth noting that males are more likely to be diagnosed with ASD than females, with a male-to-female ratio of approximately 3:1.<sup>5</sup> Girls or women with autism are often misdiagnosed or diagnosed at a later stage which may be why the prevalence of Autism is higher in males, especially at younger ages. Additionally, prevalence rates may vary among different ethnic and cultural groups due to factors like healthcare access, diagnostic practices, and cultural perceptions of ASD.

The rising prevalence of ASD in Australia highlights the urgent need for appropriate and accessible support services, especially in the health and education sectors. Greater collaboration between policymakers, healthcare professionals, educators, and communities would contribute to better outcomes for Autistic people and the Strategy is a positive step in this direction.

Raising awareness of ASD, providing training and support for professionals working with individuals with ASD, improving inclusive policies and programs and further ASD research would provide a greater understanding of ASD and lead to the development of more effective interventions and support services.

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<sup>4</sup> Rasheed Z. Autism in Australia: Understanding, challenges, and support. *Int J Health Sci (Qassim)*. 2023 Sep-Oct;17(5):1-4. PMID: 37692992; PMCID: PMC10484064.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*.

## 5.2 Education and Equity

All Autistic students, whether in a regional, remote or metropolitan school, should receive equitable opportunities to access quality education and support services.

The latest review of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs, *Strong Beginnings: Report of the Teacher Education Expert Panel*<sup>6</sup> show the importance for graduate teachers to be competent and confident to teach diverse learners, including students with disability. There also needs to be greater support for the ongoing professional development of all educators including leaders, teachers and support staff in all school sectors.

AISs offer Independent school teachers and leaders specific professional learning in managing diverse classrooms and identifying individual adjustments to support student learning and support schools to implement the NCCD. Some AISs also offer consultancy services to Independent schools to support them in delivering quality education to Autistic students. However, to support the continuation of these services for schools, increased and ongoing funding is required. There is a need for consistent cross-sectoral support and advice to improve inclusive practices for all ASD students.

The innovative Positive Partnerships program<sup>7</sup>, funded by the Australian Government Department of Education through the Helping Children with Autism program and delivered by Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect), provides advice to identify and reduce barriers to learning and create a sense of belonging for Autistic students. They also offer free workshops to support students, their families and schools. ISA supports the continuity and expansion of this program and other similar programs.

ISA believes the Strategy also must consider the current critical teacher workforce shortage and the impact this might have on the availability of quality professional support that can be provided to Autistic students in both the early childhood and school sectors. AISs report that staff turnover in Independent schools, particularly in remote areas, poses challenges for ongoing training for educators of Autistic students.

Supporting teachers to work with Autistic students and their families is essential so that teachers feel equipped to include student and family voice to inform adjustments and accommodations to support student learning by considering social, emotional, academic, physical and sensory priorities.

## 5.3 Students

Independent schools recognise that additional teaching and learning support is required for many Autistic students, and that appropriate adjustments and accommodations are necessary to support neurodiverse students in school communities. For some Autistic students, the explicit and literal teaching of social skills, emotional regulation strategies, personal development, sexual education and health may be necessary.

Further knowledge and understanding of best practice and structured support for Autistic students to successfully manage daily transitions between classes and activities and for significant transitions, such as moving from early childhood to school and transitioning from high school to work or further studies is required.

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<sup>6</sup> [2051 Teacher Expert Education Panel \(TEEP\)\\_Report\\_ACC.pdf](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Positive Partnerships | Homepage](#)

As the unemployment rate for Autistic people is relatively high, the explicit teaching of transferrable skills and self-advocacy (understanding own needs and being able to communicate needs to others) and being able to use supports independently is necessary.

#### 5.4 Disadvantage

ISA acknowledges on-going challenges for improving ASD knowledge and understanding among educators at all levels, early childhood, school and tertiary. These challenges are compounded for Autistic students in disadvantaged cohorts such as those with low socio-economic background, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and those in remote and regional areas. Building capacity in schools with disadvantaged students and providing quality education for Autistic students in these schools requires increased resources and investment and is also a focus of the current *Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System*.<sup>8</sup>

ISA suggests that specific measures should be embedded into the Strategy to improve services for Autistic people in low socio-economic, and regional and remote areas as they generally have limited access to diagnostic support and access to allied health services. Improved access to allied health services will also enable schools to collaborate with students and families to determine how to best support them.

#### 5.5 Educators

Educators require a broader and more holistic understanding of ASD and would benefit from targeted professional learning on how Autistic students learn and think (executive functioning), how they may be impacted by sensory processing differences (vestibular and proprioception) and challenges they may have in expressive and receptive communication.

To effectively support Autistic students, teachers require a deep understanding on how to differentiate between ASD behaviours and those that are considered to be a behavioural concern. This is necessary to provide a safe environment for both Autistic students and their peers, so that triggers can be reduced, sensory overload minimised, and Autistic students are not disciplined for behaviour which is directly related to being Autistic.

AISs report that more knowledge and understanding is needed to support female Autistic students, especially around masking and how their functional impact at school might be overlooked. There also needs to be an increased understanding amongst educators of the co-occurrence of Autism and mental health difficulties.

School leadership that values a strengths-based approach and Autistic student voice can help to build understanding, appreciation and acceptance of differences and shape positive language and an inclusive school culture.

#### 5.6 School environments

ISA recognises that there remains significant room for improvement in the provision of relevant sensory environments in educational settings for Autistic students. The Strategy could therefore provide guidelines for early childhood settings and schools to incorporate sensory-friendly

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.education.gov.au/review-inform-better-and-fairer-education-system/consultations/review-inform-better-and-fairer-education-system-consultation>

environmental measures to provide the best possible environment for Autistic students to support their learning. There could also be consideration within the existing school capital grant funding application process for infrastructure that promotes Autism friendly campuses as well as additional capital funding to help schools meet the needs of Autistic students.

AISs report that it can be difficult for many Independent schools, particularly those in regional, remote or low socio-economic areas, to plan for and ensure that classrooms meet sensory requirements for Autistic students. In many remote Independent schools, classroom facilities vary in age and condition. While some provisions can be made for visual and auditory stimuli in classrooms, other factors such as lighting, outdoor noise and smells are more difficult to control.

Creating an Autistic friendly environment is an area that requires greater access to advice, consultancy and funding to retrofit current educational settings. There are many excellent resources available to educators, however finding them can be time consuming and accessing resources can be challenging for many schools.

National resourcing for individual sensory assessments and environmental modifications in schools, such as lighting, sound dampening, and flexible seating, could greatly support Autistic students in educational settings and help to raise awareness of sensory overload.

### 5.7 Parents and Community

In the Independent school sector, great value is placed on parent engagement and understanding the unique challenges and needs of parents of Autistic children and creating positive family-school partnerships. These partnerships are vital in creating a supportive educational environment for Autistic students.

Parents of Autistic children seek inclusive schools across all sectors with experienced and knowledgeable staff who can provide appropriate adjustments for their child's needs. Independent schools value open communication and collaboration between parents, community, and educators to build an inclusive school environment.

It is just as important to develop an understanding of ASD for non-Autistic students and their families. Within the broader community, overcoming a lack of awareness and building greater understanding of ASD is essential to fostering more awareness and developing inclusive societies which in turn supports schools in this work.

The Strategy could create programs and awareness campaigns to develop more inclusive cultures within our communities. Awareness programs could be developed, informed by extensive consultations with Autistic people and their families to overcome existing challenges for Autistic people and create better educational and societal outcomes.

## 6. ENHANCING RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

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Enhancing research into various aspects of Autism Spectrum Disorder would greatly assist in informing the National Autism Strategy. Policy makers in all sectors, including education, have benefitted from work undertaken in relation to the prevalence of ASD and the impact of changes to

diagnostic criteria<sup>9</sup> obtained in research undertaken by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). The 2018 SDAC survey aimed to assess autism prevalence and its impact. Key findings included the noting of a 25.1% increase in autism cases since 2015, totaling 205,200 individuals (0.08% of the population).<sup>10</sup> The availability of such research, data and analysis has generated better outcomes for Autistic people in general, and has enabled more inclusive and aware policy development and implementation in educational settings.

Feedback to ISA has also emphasised the need for more research in areas such as community perceptions of autism, individual and institutional perceptions of people with autism in sectors such as education and employment. Further investment in Autism Spectrum Disorder research to assist in informed decision-making and the development of effective interventions would also assist schools and institutions to provide adaptive measures based on improved diagnosis rates, accessibility, and timing early in a student's academic journey. And as noted previously, further research could also assist in the provision of effective transition support from primary to secondary and tertiary education.

## 7. CONCLUSION

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ISA believes that a National Autism Strategy could guide a range of initiatives that advocate for all Autistic people. The Independent school sector would welcome further support, resources and guidelines to further build educator capacity, understanding and expertise in providing quality education to Autistic students and develop more Autism-friendly educational environments.

The Strategy could develop national guidelines for best practice in the development of Autism-friendly campuses, inclusive practice for Autistic students and examples of quality peer mentoring programs, that provides Autistic-led group mentoring and training, and empowerment programs through school and online mentoring.

Providing individual adjustments for each student to access the curriculum and feel a sense of belonging is critical and student and family voice in collaboration with school staff and allied health professionals provides a model for best practice. Consideration needs to be given to curriculum adjustments, internal and external assessments, social-emotional and peer support, daily transitions and all school activities to provide an inclusive educational experience.

The Strategy could also foster a more inclusive society for Autistic people through active engagement and collaboration among policymakers, healthcare professionals, educators, parents, and the broader community. Embracing neurodiversity and valuing the unique strengths of Autistic people can provide a strong sense of belonging and empowerment.

### Contact details

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<sup>9</sup> [Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2018 | Australian Bureau of Statistics \(abs.gov.au\).](#)

<sup>10</sup> [ibid.](#)



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