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“Better Services Better Outcomes” **Response from Autism Victoria.**

ABOUT US:

Autism Victoria is the umbrella agency representing services and individuals with a specific interest in Autism Spectrum Disorder – which includes Autism, Asperger Syndrome and Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified. The Autism Services Coordinating Committee is a standing sub committee of Autism Victoria and acts as our professional advisory group. Autism Victoria has over 1500 members – families, agencies, interested individuals and supporters. The four Department of Education, Employment and Training autism specific schools are Organisational Members of Autism Victoria.

The President of Autism Victoria is Dr Lawrence Bartak who has an international profile as a clinical psychologist, educator and researcher in the field of Autism Spectrum Disorders. The Chairperson of the Autism Services Coordinating Committee is Dr Amanda Richdale of RMIT University Dept of Psychology and Disability Studies who is a psychologist, researcher and educator specialising in Autism Spectrum Disorders and learning disorders. She is also the convenor of the SPELD Professional Sub-Committee. The Executive Officer of Autism Victoria is Mrs Amanda Golding, a trained teacher, experienced administrator and parent of an adult with autism.

Autism Victoria is well placed to represent the opinion and interests of those affected by an Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Autism Victoria has been in communication with the Program for Students with Disabilities and Impairments staff for some time re our concerns for the provision of appropriate educational options for students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. The Autism Services Coordinating Committee prepared an eight point Statement of Concerns which was forwarded to the Minister and discussed at length with Department of Education, Employment and Training staff. A copy of this statement is attached to this response as Appendix One.

We are extremely disappointed that the department did not include Autism Victoria, as the key advocacy and support group representing students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder, in the group to consult with Professor Meyer, or to the consultancy team responsible for collecting feedback on *Better Services Better Outcomes*.

Autism Victoria has spent some time consulting with various sections of our constituency in the past two months and would like to offer the following responses to the recommendations in *Better Services Better Outcomes*. We welcome the department's decision to extend the consultancy time, as the initial time frame was totally inadequate. We have also been asked by many parents to convey to the department their frustration with the consultancy meetings – specifically:

- notification to parents by schools of the consultancy schedule was patchy
- the early evening times scheduled for some of the sessions made attendance difficult for families
- the inability of many of the session convenors to answer even basic questions about the recommendations was frustrating
- parents generally felt that the sessions were a 'whitewash', and that the recommendations were a 'done deal' regardless of the input provided by the consultancy process.

GENERAL COMMENTS:

- All indications in the documents provided are that more is to be done with the same bucket of money. The report acknowledges that the number and support needs of the proposed 'Special Needs' group of students is unknown. The best recommendations and models in the world have no value if there is insufficient resourcing allocated to their implementation and ongoing management.
- Specialist schools have small enrolments, especially those schools which enrol students with the highest level of need, for example, the four autism specific Special Developmental Schools. There is a real fear that the proposed funding models will effectively reduce the total funds available to these schools, rendering them less viable. Lost will be not only the best learning environment for these most challenging of students, but also the critical mass of specialist, highly skilled teachers who are best placed to provide effective training and consultancy support to other schools.

**SPECIALIST CENTRES OF EXCELLENCE MUST BE DEVELOPED FURTHER,
NOT STARVED OUT OF EXISTENCE.**

- The thrust of *Better Services Better Outcomes* is for Inclusive Education, with the strong implication that this means generic or mainstream school settings as opposed to specialist settings. Our members do not support the move to generic, non specialist schools as the only available schooling option for students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. Why do autistic students consistently make good progress in specialist schools? Why do parents choose specialist schools (each of the four autism schools in Melbourne have extensive waiting lists)? Why do so many people with Autism or Asperger Syndrome experience such a totally miserable time at school?

MANY PARENTS, STUDENTS AND AUTISM EXPERTS EXPRESS A PREFERENCE FOR SPECIALIST EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS, NOT GENERIC ONES

- The provision of specialist schools and programs does not mean that inclusion cannot be achieved. For students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder, the skills necessary to effectively participate in mainstream educational programs are largely absent. Specialist input is essential, on an ongoing basis, to develop and maintain the communication, socialisation and behaviour skills necessary to participate in mainstream school programs.

SPECIALIST SCHOOLS AND SUPPORT PROGRAMS ENHANCE INCLUSION, THEY DO NOT INHIBIT IT

- The model proposed by *Better Services Better Outcomes* implies ‘normalisation’, which goes hand in hand with the concept of ‘least restrictive environment’. Large, mainstream schools are not the only way of providing a least restrictive environment, especially at secondary level. For a number of students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder, the least restrictive environment will be the small specialist school with highly skilled staff and specially designed learning programs.

SQUARE PEGS DO NOT FIT INTO ROUND HOLES

- The recommendations do not indicate any level of understanding of the needs and rights of students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. Large generic school environments discriminate against students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. The essential elements of a school environment – such as the diversity of opportunities, the encouragement of independence, initiative and success and the complex social structures, are all extremely intimidating to the student with an Autism Spectrum Disorder, and actively prevent them from accessing a meaningful and fulfilling educational program.

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER STUDENTS HAVE THE RIGHT TO A SPECIALIST ENVIRONMENT IF THIS BEST MEETS THEIR NEEDS.

COMMENTS SPECIFIC TO THE RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. *A commitment to an inclusive educational system*

It is clear that the thrust of both the PENG and Meyer reports is for an inclusive educational system. The principles of inclusion, appropriate programs, partnership with parents and respect of the views of students are all laudable. What is of concern to our constituents is the absence of any realistic acknowledgement of the significant cost of providing an inclusive environment and educational program for students with substantially different learning needs and challenging behaviour patterns. There is a very strong fear that the funding models envisaged in the *Better Services Better Outcomes* report will result in a reduction in the viability of small, specialist schools, and that they will cease to be part of the public education system. The loss of these specialist schools will deny students with disorders such as Autism Spectrum Disorder the opportunity to develop the social, communication, learning and survival skills necessary to be able to effectively participate in inclusive educational and community environments. We would like to see specific articulation that, for a significant number of students, inclusion is not readily achievable, and students will require extensive inputs and ongoing support.

2. *Most promising practices developed and disseminated by school networks*

This principle is, on the surface, an excellent one. It is exactly what the autism specialist schools have been promoting and seeking to effect (with minimal resourcing) for a number of years. But the recommendation omits to note a crucial critical success factor. In order to develop the professional expertise and facility for dissemination of this expertise to school networks, there need to be Centres of Excellence, or clusters of staff and students who can learn from each other, to work together to research, test and refine the 'most promising practices'. There is no acknowledgement of this fact, and no indication that the department will ensure such Centres of Excellence will be sufficiently resourced to enable not only the development of skills, but the effective dissemination of those skills via the proposed educational networks.

3. *Defining students with special educational needs*

The Program for Students with Disabilities and Impairments model has been horrendous for students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder who do not meet the rigid and restrictive eligibility criteria used by the Department of Education, Employment and Training. This has in fact been one of our major areas of concern previously discussed with department staff. We welcome the recommendation for a broadening of the definition of students with special needs. However, we cannot offer unconditional support for the recommendation. There is no indication as yet of the criteria that will be used to identify eligibility for 'special educational need' classification. We strongly advocate that these criteria be developed in consultation with clinical experts as well as those with an educational background. The mistakes of previous criteria should not be repeated – especially

- rigid reliance on arbitrary cut off scores from standardised tests;
- consideration of specific deficits in isolation rather than taking a whole view of the student's level of effective functioning;
- misunderstanding of the student's presenting condition;
- questioning of the professional opinion of clinicians about the student's presenting condition;
- insistence on establishing eligibility in one of the seven categories, when the student may have, for example, borderline impairments in several categories.

BROADENING OF THE DEFINITION OF SPECIAL NEEDS MUST BE ACCOMPANIED BY EFFECTIVE, FUNCTIONAL CRITERIA WHICH SEEK TO IDENTIFY BUT NOT SPECIFICALLY EXCLUDE STUDENTS FROM RECEIVING ADDITIONAL SUPPORT.

4. A Framework for Resource Distribution – the Special Educational Needs Program.

Again, the recommendation to ‘pool’ existing program funds reads well. However, a fundamental flaw clearly emerges when it is acknowledged that the department does not know if the monies to be pooled will be adequate to cover the additional support required by the students to be included in the new program. There is a real fear that the program will be driven by a yet to be devised set of criteria that will make sure that the identified numbers and needs of students will match the funding available. The changes to the DAI group to include only students on Level 3 to Level 6 will have a severe impact on the structure and funding to existing specialist schools. The department need to articulate specific strategies to protect these schools to ensure their ongoing viability. Parents in particular have expressed their concern with the proposed resourcing model and the effect it will have within schools where students will be effectively competing with each other for allocated (scarce) resources. How will schools, parents and students be supported by the department to ensure appropriate, fair and equitable allocation of additional resources?

THE PROPOSED FUNDING MODEL HAS THE POTENTIAL TO GENERATE UNACCEPTABLE COMPETITION FOR THE LIMITED RESOURCES AVAILABLE

5. Enhanced new role for specialist schools and settings

Again, this recommendation is part of the concerns previously discussed by us with department staff, and we applaud the inclusion of this recommendation. However, we have major concerns with the ability of specialist schools to remain viable in the new funding regime, and to be able to offer additional consultancy and training services without adequate resourcing.

6., 7., 8. & 9. Assessment Models, Accountability and Reporting.

We fully support the recommendations in the Meyer report and in *Better Services Better Outcomes* in relation to the instruments and personnel used to identify eligibility for support and level of educational need. We also support moving away from a disability focussed model to a functional assessment model. However, the report does not articulate how and by whom these assessment questionnaires are to be developed, and how and by whom the assessments are to be effected. Under the current model, parents with a child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder are required to obtain a full multi-disciplinary assessment or reassessment, often at their own expense. There are many instances where department staff have rejected the assessment and diagnostic opinion of these specialist teams and deemed the student to be ineligible for the DAI program. This has led to uncertainty, inequity and great distress. Parents and schools want reasonable assurance that the new model will not be a continuation of this unacceptable situation.

We also fully support the development and implementation of documented educational programs, overseen by the Program Support Group, and continually evaluated using appropriate Assessment and Reporting tools. The department needs to take action to ensure

that Program Support Groups are proactive not reactive, that parents have a valued role in the PSG and that specialist consultants are included in the PSG.

ASSESSMENT PROCESSES FOR RESOURCE ELIGIBILITY AND EDUCATIONAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRESS MUST BE APPROPRIATE AND FULLY RESOURCED

10. Review of Eligibility and Resourcing.

Periodic review of Eligibility and Resourcing is appropriate and necessary. But it should work both ways. The department must be prepared to identify and accept that resourcing needs may increase for some students over time, as well as decrease. The department must also accept that a review of eligibility should not mean parents have to arrange and fund a full diagnostic reassessment or a functional assessment, as is currently so often the case.

11. Quality of teaching and support services.

This recommendation is fully supported – the recognition of the need for special education units in pre service training courses is welcome, as is the need for ongoing, specialist in service training for all teaching and support staff. We would encourage the Department of Education, Employment and Training to establish a pre-service training program for all teacher aides, and provision of in-service programs for aides working with students with specific disabilities or in specialist programs. So often teacher aides, who are a critical component of the student support system, are untrained and have to fund their own in-service program.

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AUTISM SERVICES COORDINATING COMMITTEE

STATEMENT OF CONCERNS RE – PROVISION OF SUPPORT - SCHOOLS

1. Students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder require support to access a suitable educational program.
2. The Department of Education, Employment and Training Program for Students with Disabilities and Impairments Autism Spectrum Disorder eligibility criteria should reflect that Autism Spectrum Disorder is the primary disorder and that any or all of the following may co-exist:
 - ◆ Intellectual Disability
 - ◆ Behavioural Disorder
 - ◆ Learning Difficulties
 - ◆ Language Disorder
 - ◆ Anxiety Disorder
 - ◆ Social Impairment
3. The individual needs of students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder should be determined by an Educational Needs Questionnaire which takes into account the range of abilities of Autism Spectrum Disorder students as well as the pragmatic and behavioural difficulties they experience.
4. The Department of Education, Employment and Training need to gather data from their school enrolments relating to the needs of students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder.
5. We strongly support the development of accountability measures for schools enrolling students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder funded by the Program for Students with Disabilities and Impairments to ensure effective educational outcomes.
6. The Department of Education, Employment and Training must acknowledge the cost to the Health and Human Services sector and to parents of the assessment (and reassessment) process, and contribute materially to the defrayment of these costs.
7. There is a need for an agreed Diagnostic Statement pro forma to be available for use by Autism Spectrum Disorder Assessment Teams. Such a pro forma would closely follow the DSM IV criteria as evidence of an Autism Spectrum Disorder.
8. The Department of Education, Employment and Training list of acceptable assessment tools provides limitations in the determination of a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder.

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