

Review OF SPECIAL EDUCATION 2010

Submission from



Autism New Zealand Inc.
Including Asperger Syndrome and Related Disorders



16th March 2010

Introduction

Autism New Zealand Incorporated (CC21220) is a national, not-for-profit organisation with fifteen branches and nearly 6,000 members.

The New Zealand Autism Spectrum Disorder Guideline notes that in New Zealand there are approximately 40,000 people with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)¹. Autism New Zealand provides information, advice and support to those with an ASD and their families and whanau. Autism New Zealand also provides parent education programmes and other services and training – some of which are funded by the Ministries of Health and Education.

This submission has been prepared by the Chief Executive on behalf of the National Board and branches who have contributed to the views contained in this document. Additionally members were invited to provide their views and those views have also been included. The National Board is as follows:

Wendy Duff – President and parent of a teenager with an ASD

Glenys Fry – parent of a teenager with an ASD

Martin Wylie – parent of a young child with an ASD

John McKeown – principal of a special needs school

Heather Clay – parent of a child with an ASD

Margaret Mikaere – Maori Board member

Angela Arnold-Saritepe – Psychologist

Jen Birch – person with Asperger's Syndrome

Oral Submission

Autism New Zealand wishes to take up an opportunity to present to a panel on its submission and can be contacted through the Chief Executive, Alison Molloy on alison.molloy@autismnz.org.nz or 04 470 7616 (Wk) or 027 242 2441 (Mob). We understand that a panel will be meeting in Auckland on 16th April 2010 and would like to attend that session if possible.

Summary

The discussion document "Review of Special Education 2010" describes a vision for students with special education needs where "the most important word in special education is education" and the ideal as being "we could do away with the term special education and the idea that some students have deficits in favour of recognising the potential of all students and their needs for personalised learning" (p8).

In the short to medium term this means that there is something to work towards rather than expecting to achieve such an ideal immediately.

Autism New Zealand is of the view that "choice" must remain at the forefront of decision-makers minds. Many children with an ASD are unable to be included in a mainstream classroom without causing significant disruption because of the sensory overload they experience in such an environment.

¹ New Zealand Autism Spectrum Disorder Guideline, Ministries of Health and Education 2008 p 17

A primary focus for Autism New Zealand is to increase awareness of ASD amongst those who contribute to the development of these children and this includes all levels of the schooling system; Governance and management, teachers in their training and in their classrooms and at least adequate training and support for teacher aides.

Recognising that there will never be enough resource in our small country, the government must pay attention to the fact that the number of diagnoses is still on the rise with children as young as 2 years old being diagnosed. Forward planning to ensure these children and those already in the education system are in an environment which provides safe and supported learning is an essential step towards the achievement of the ideal.

Question One a): What is most needed to help schools succeed?

Training, training. Training – for Boards of Trustees, Principals and other managers, teachers and teacher aides. Ensuring that part of the core training that all receives includes information about disabilities and related requirements for children in the classroom is essential. Ongoing professional development is also a requirement to provide currency and ongoing excellence for teachers and teacher aides to apply.

Dedicated resources to develop and implement the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process to ensure that these are being managed and monitored more effectively so that students achieve their desired goals.

Using early intervention resources effectively to ensure that information already gathered is applied immediately a child joins a school. This also requires an improvement to information systems which struggle to keep up with transition phases in a child's life in the education system.

Question One b): How could schools work together to succeed?

A revolving door policy would allow easy access to satellite classes and the mainstream so that students could utilise the best of each for their own learning programmes. Utilising the Special School Itinerancy services more effectively would also enable schools to collaborate more effectively. There may well be a geographical variation that needs to be taken into account with possibly the SEITs working more effectively in the urban areas and the "Arahunga model" more appropriate for the smaller towns. This would require further examination to establish if this is indeed the case.

Special schools are critical to providing choice for families of children with special needs, particularly for those with an ASD. Collaboration between special schools and mainstream schools will ensure that students get the best access at the right time. It is noted in the submission that "usually parents also prefer that all their children attend the same school". We are not sure that this is the case with families with an ASD as the options for attending more than one school for different purposes would generally suit many parents of the child with an ASD better.

Funding is of course a key issue here with some schools struggling to maintain services on their existing budgets. Individualised funding would incentivise those schools that require incentivising to put the student at the centre of their planning and decision making. Rewarding those schools who collaborate effectively for students benefit would also assist.

Question Two: What needs to be done to make transitions work better?

We agree that effective transitions occur when there is an understanding of what the students want and need and when there is active planning and flexibility for services and support. We suggest that transitions are made more difficult for families and the student when the parents or primary carers views are not listened to and when there is insufficient awareness of the importance of having an understanding of the special need/ASD or indeed in planning for a transition.

Early planning and preparation is critical in the transition process with full engagement of schools, support workers and families. This also requires better record keeping and reporting of the history of the student.

Question Three: How could services be better focussed on the needs of the students and their families?

Identifying a culture and philosophy that supports students with special needs and is not just “lip-service” is the most important element of improving this focus. A case management approach can assist in the process of keeping the student in the centre of the decision making. This could well include a lead agency who would be the key contact for the family and who would provide a consolidated record of information and history.

A co-ordinated approach to specialist services would also assist. We note that there appears to be a significant shortage of some specialists, for example speech language therapists, and this creates delays for families who then have to find other ways of managing, adding to an already stressful situation.

Question Four: What arrangements for funding, decision making, verification and fund-holding should we have?

As has been stated previously there needs to be a re-focus on funding to take account of the increasing number of children being diagnosed with special needs in particular with an ASD. Clearly key funding decisions must remain at a central level however options such as increased bulk funding at a regional level that is tagged for special needs or individualised funding where the funds go with the child – perhaps even including the base funding – should also be considered.

There are a significant number of students with an ASD who do not receive ORRS funding. This is, in part, due to the verification process that is currently undertaken at a central level. Many of these students do not fit the regimented criteria and yet they have the potential to cause more significant disruption in the classroom if their needs are not identified and supported. The verification process itself is cumbersome and complicated and has a high rejection rate because of the process rather than the lack of eligibility. Examples of this can be provided. A process whereby national guidelines and budget were set but the decision making was at a regional level would facilitate a better recognition of the differing needs of some students.

The ORRS funding pool is insufficient to meet the number of students who require some or a significant amount of support in the classroom. The pool is set at 1% of those who require support however if the level and complexity of need is increasing then consideration must be given to increasing that percentage to a more appropriate level.

Students are currently unable to access special schools unless they are ORRS funded however in many cases special schools are the desired place for families with a child with an ASD. Decision making as to whether a child attends a special needs school should be made at a local level through a resource centre which supports schools to accept all students. This has budget implications however the need for greater flexibility is paramount if ideals are to be achieved in a realistic timeframe. There may well be an opportunity to consider different funding streams with perhaps a mix of Health and Education funding or a different application of the Correspondence School funding. An open mind as to how best to use limited resources will facilitate greater access for a higher percentage of those who most need support.

Question Five a): How can individually targeted services and supports be made more efficient?

Noting that the ORRS funding pool is insufficient for the number of students who require access to enable the government to deliver on its education objectives, we are of the view that sharing skills and information is the best way to make better use of a constrained resource. Options such as pooling extra teaching time and teacher aide team need to be managed carefully to ensure that they don't further cause students to "fall between the cracks". The processes of identification of need and evaluation of results need to be sufficiently robust to ensure accountability and transparency however the current processes are relatively cumbersome which impacts on actual service delivery time. Streamlining some of these processes, perhaps by making them more robust but less frequent and ensuring that information is stored in an accessible way so that it can be shared, will assist in efficiency gains.

Question Five b): Is the current mix of programmes, services and supports right and does it provide value for money? What changes would you suggest?

Specialist services are a critical component of the service mix, however it appears that waiting lists for these services are growing rather than reducing. We would suggest that both the training and employment models contribute to this. The balance of 25% funding allocation for specialist services appears to be about right so long as these services are available in an appropriately timely way.

The teacher aide allocation is insufficient with many teacher aide hours being put to uses other than dedicated support for children. This comes about in some schools as a result of insufficient funding but it also indicates that the teacher aide role is not valued as it should be. The lack of dedicated training and support for teacher aides is not acceptable and results in a key service that is not valued except on an individual basis. The consequentially high turnover of staff in this area means that many students fall further back in their learning as they have to go through an increasing number of transitions and uncertainty. Changes to the teacher aide role should include formal training, a better pay rate and better support as part of the holistic team that provides learning and support for the student.

Release time for teachers is important however we would suggest that the release time cost for teachers who have to use it for administration purposes has a high cost for students with an ASD. These changes to routine cause a high level of anxiety to students which can often result in behaviour that impacts on the whole classroom. We suggest that more administration needs to be carried out by dedicated administrative staff, allowing the teachers to focus on their areas of excellence and skill.

Question Six: How can the quality of services be improved?

Developing and maintaining a culture that supports excellent service delivery is very important. Providing an environment where schools and those within the schools can share information and learn from experience, both positive and negative, will ensure that there is safe and challenging process of continuous improvement. A key value for Autism New Zealand is to put the family in the middle of all decision making – this could well be shared by schools and bureaucracy alike. If the student and the family is core to any decision making and involved in those decisions then the quality of the services must become more relevant and therefore improved.

Sharing information across agencies and across and within schools is also important for improved services. Additionally shared and regular training for all staff is important.

Question Seven: How can families and schools be better informed?

There is a reasonably consistent and high level of cynicism regarding the Individual Education Plans and their effectiveness. The system is a good one when it works well and all are involved in the development, implementation and then review of the plan for the student. Parents of children with special needs including ASDs have a right to be informed early about progress rather than at the end of a term or year. Recognising that there are a limited number of hours in each working day it is important to all parents that information that is provided to them regarding their child is easily digestible and delivered in an appropriate and timely way. Better record keeping will facilitate this so long as it is recorded in a retrievable way.

Parents of children with a special education need find that access to the teacher is often difficult and we suggest that this could improve in a structured way with set times at the end (or beginning) of certain days of the week being available for appointment.

Schools too are dependant on information however there is a tension between receiving information and having the time to digest it. We are of the view that schools are often in the position of receiving too much information without the ability to prioritise or filter it in an effective way.

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

Successful special education includes options for children with special needs. These options must include mainstreaming with adequate support, satellite classrooms, special schools and resource centres. Recognising that there is a cost in providing this choice we are of the view that not providing it will result in a much higher economic cost in the future with many students with special needs, in particular those with an ASD, struggling to become independent as an adult.

Successful special education provides an environment where the child is able to be in a class and learn to the best of his or her ability in a safe and supportive environment.

Successful special education has a work force, including teacher aides, that is well trained and supported and the quality of the education is of the highest level.

Successful special education includes a supportive and effective support team which involves families, specialists and the wider community where appropriate.

Successful special education has appropriate and targeted funding that meets the needs of a growing population of students in this category.

Successful special education operates in an environment where difference is valued and fostered.

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

A formal process that includes escalation is important, however it is also important that, insofar as it is possible, the communication between schools and families and families and other agencies is early and transparent so that surprises are minimised. A case management approach would also facilitate this.

Question 10: What is the most important change that would improve outcomes for children?

The most important change would be that the entire education workforce had sufficient training in the support of children with special needs whether they were involved in special education or not.