

### **School Overview**

Northern School for Autism (NSA) is a Victorian State Government specialist school which exclusively addresses the educational needs of students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The educational program, including the pedagogical approach, curriculum and behaviour support, are based upon autism friendly, evidence based practices including a structured teaching approach and School Wide Positive Behaviour Support. The school achieved accreditation via One Certification (previously a subsidiary of Amaze Victoria) in the ASD Educational Standards. The school is a centre of excellence in the provision of programs for students with autism. The school actively seeks networking opportunities and provides a range of professional development programs to build the capacity of schools across the system to improve their ability to support students with autism. The school has a high demand for places and enrolment grows each year. Each year the school recruits and trains significant numbers of new teachers, therapists (speech pathologists and occupational therapists), and teacher aides.

The school was established in 2006 to meet the needs of students with autism residing in the Northern Metropolitan Region of Melbourne. The school operates across two campuses located in Reservoir and Lalor. Reservoir is an Early and Middle Years campus (5 years to 14 years) and Lalor is a Later Years campus (14 years to 18 years). The Reservoir Campus opened in 2013, providing state of the art facilities for the Early and Middle Years' students. The Senior Campus at Lalor opened in 2012 and provides programs for the Later Years' students; the campus is co-located with Peter Lalor Vocational College, close to transport, community services and shopping precincts. In 2015 the school opened a satellite program at Norris Bank Primary School for primary aged students to increase opportunities for inclusion.

Enrolment	Staffing
Reservoir - 190	97
Lalor – 60	21
NBPS Satellite – 10	3

### Mission Statement

Students are supported towards developing their personal and educational potentials, so as to be valued contributors to family and community life.

### School Vision

Northern School for Autism strives to be a centre of excellence.

### Motto

“Learning for Life”

### School Values

- Trust
- Understanding
- Safety

### Educational Philosophy

The community of NSA believes that to succeed in the world, students need to develop the capacity to:

- Manage themselves as individuals, and in relation to others
- Understand the world in which they live
- Act effectively in that world
- Make a positive contribution to their world

### Education Support Services

To support the implementation of the educational programs the school provides a range of specialist services including speech pathology and occupational therapy. Through a team based, collaborative approach, therapy program delivery and support is provided within classroom settings. Teachers and therapists work within multi-disciplinary teams to ensure that students have access to consistent and effective therapeutic programs across the curriculum.

### Issue 1 - Teaching and Learning, Instructional Model for Students with an ASD

NSA implements a structured teaching approach that is informed by current research and evidence based practice (TEACCH™). All staff members are trained and work in accordance with the autism specific NSA Teaching and Learning Protocols. The school delivers the Victorian Curriculum (predominantly Levels A-D) as well as an autism specific supplementary curriculum. The autism specific component of the curriculum builds on students' strengths and skills, within a supportive environment, with a particular focus on:

- Communication
- Inter-personal/social skills
- Executive functioning, central coherence and theory of mind
- Personal Learning: self-regulation, sensory needs, imagination and play skills – addressing issues such as repetitive behaviour and restricted interests.

Recommendation A – All schools (mainstream and specialist), early intervention (mainstream and specialist), and adult services should have a defined instructional approach in regard to meeting the needs of students with an ASD. All schools should ensure that goals set in the student's Individual Learning Plan are designed to reduce the differences and impact of autism.

### **Issue 2 - Eligibility for Program for Students with Disability funding under Autism Spectrum Disorder**

To be eligible for admission, students must have a diagnosis of autism and be eligible for funding under the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) criteria of the Department's Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD). The criteria includes:

- A diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder

AND

- Significant deficits in adaptive behaviour established by a composite score of two standard

deviations or more below the mean on an approved standardised test of adaptive behaviours

AND

- Significant deficits in language skills established by a comprehensive speech pathology assessment demonstrating language skills equivalent to a composite score of two standard deviations or more below the mean

There is a cohort of students with autism who are not eligible for funding under the PSD - ASD category. These students often access funding via the Severe Behaviour Disorder (SBD) category. This is unjust as generally the difficulties these children and young people face in regulating their emotions and behaviour are largely because of the impact of autism upon their development. The reason that we observe students exhibiting severe challenging behaviour in some settings is because they require a different teaching approach and educational environment to successfully access school. Many students with autism are excluded from mainstream schools (for severe/challenging behaviour), or indeed self-exclude (school refusal), due to high anxiety. There appears to be an expectation of those working in general education settings that people with autism adapt to our schools, rather than the schools and the adults working within them adapting their behaviour, environment and teaching approach to meet the needs of these students. There are students who are not eligible for PSD funding who require additional support and do receive such support, however, there is also a cohort of learners who have significant levels of need for whom the avenue to access funding support in the Victorian State Government school system is not available.

In the Catholic school system, students with autism, who do not have a co-morbid communication or developmental disorder, access additional resources via a funding program with a broader, more inclusive scope that includes students with social/emotional disorders. Autism is a spectrum – it impacts on students' social, emotional and behavioural development regardless of their intellectual ability.

Recommendation B - There are excellent models of inclusive practice for students with autism in the Victorian Education System; these models should be replicated across all settings – including specialist school settings that are not autism specific – to support children and young people with autism regardless of their eligibility for PSD funding.

Recommendation C – The State Government should more inclusively provide resources to students with autism, particularly those with a normal range IQ but who have challenging behaviour, social and or emotional difficulties so they are able to access the support they require to ensure a successful, equal opportunity education.

### **Issue 3 – Capacity of Staff Working with Students with ASD**

Northern School for Autism engages professionally trained personnel including speech therapists and occupational therapists (OTs), to work alongside classroom teachers. This is to ensure there is a focus on teaching and learning and that students achieve the goals set in their Individual Learning Plans. Half of all classrooms have two teachers to ensure students have access to teachers (professional learning support), rather than teacher aides. Engaging more teachers and therapists promotes professionalism and guarantees higher quality programming with increased assessment and explicit teaching. Since this workforce model has been introduced there have been significant gains in student learning progress and a significant reduction in EduSafe and Incident Reports at the school.

*Therapeutic Provision and Support*

At the school therapists work in a collaborative or 'push in' model rather than a withdrawal or 'pull out' model. This is because there are several deficits within a 'pull out' model; firstly it means therapists remove students from the classroom and work with them in isolation for a short session each week. This means that strategies and interventions are not able to be implemented across students' whole program in every curriculum domain as the usual team working with the student are not skilled in such supports (as they are absent from the sessions). Secondly if teachers do not make a referral for therapy intervention, students will not receive therapy support.

In a collaborative or 'push in' model therapists are allocated to work in every classroom for a set period of time each week. In this way therapists work with/observe all students and are able to assist teachers identify the communication/speech/language and occupational therapy needs of students. Teachers and therapists work together to identify goals for the students' Individual Learning Plans as well as devise strategies and implement programs. The therapists model strategies and provide feedback for teachers. This trans-disciplinary approach is highly effective for students.

Recommendation D - Schools should ensure that therapists work in a multi-disciplinary/collaborative or 'push in' model rather than use a withdrawal or 'pull out' model.

**Issue 4 – Minimum Qualification of Staff Working with Students with ASD**

In Victoria there is no minimum qualification for staff members working as Education Support – Teacher Aides in schools. This is unfair to students with autism as it means that in the vast majority of schools the least skilled staff are employed to work with the neediest students. Students are not able to succeed to the best of their ability without expert support. If an Education Support staff member has, by default, the responsibility for the students' education programs and the majority of the supervision of a student, the student is not receiving an education on the same basis as the student without a disability, as students without disabilities are taught by trained and registered teachers, not unqualified carers.

Recommendation E - All staff working with students with a disability including autism must have a minimum level of training such as a Certificate III in Education Support.

Recommendation F - That teachers develop and implement education programs for students with an ASD, including attending Student Support Group meetings, developing Individual Learning Plans, completing assessments, setting goals, selecting strategies and reporting upon learning progress.

**Issue 5 – Assessment and Curriculum**

Currently there is limited accountability in regard to the learning progress of students who are recipients of the PSD. The challenge in measuring student success via student goal acquisition is that teachers must ensure goals are at the zone of proximal development. The ABLES and Victorian Curriculum Levels A-D are available in Victoria and bring rigour to the delivery of educational programs for students with disabilities including ASD. The ABLES gives all schools the ability to comprehensively assess students' needs as well as their abilities, in order to set goals for Individual Learning Plans. The Victorian Curriculum Levels A-D provides a broad and engaging curriculum for students with disabilities including autism on the same basis of students without a disability. The ABLES assessment places students at their developmental within the Victorian Curriculum.

Recommendation G - All schools should be mandated to use the Abilities Based Learning Education Support (ABLES) assessment tool as well as report on students' progress against Levels A-D of the Victorian Curriculum (VC) for all students not yet working at Level F or above.

**Issue 6 – Specialist School Leadership**

Currently, to be appointed as a principal in a Victorian State Government specialist school, the applicant must have a post-graduate qualification in special education. This means that there are only small numbers of applicants for specialist school principal vacancies. Principals do not require a post-graduate qualification to effectively lead a school. Principals in mainstream school are often highly skilled and have a deep understanding of disability and disadvantage. It would be of benefit to the specialist school sector to permit a wider range of expert educators to lead specialist schools.

Recommendation H – Educators without post-graduate qualifications in specialist education should be permitted to lead specialist schools to ensure specialist schools are led by those with most expertise.