

19 April 2016

Family & Community Development Committee

Parliament House

Spring Street

EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

RE: Inquiry into services for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Terms of Reference B: The availability and adequacy of services

We are the parents of students at Moomba Park Primary School, Fawkner who have Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Our children are as varied as our own family circumstances; however we are all grateful for the student-specific educational opportunities provided at this school.

The school embeds the evidence-based practice of Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) across all classes and social, cultural and sporting activities. The school operates an ASD-specific classroom with high level supports along with Behaviour Therapists working within mainstream classrooms. Students are placed in the setting they will most benefit from. This will change as skills and abilities improve, new challenges emerge and as the nature or complexity of the subject material advances. Small groups within classrooms and 'pull-out' sessions are used to enable a staged transition between settings. The school places the student in the most inclusive and least restrictive setting where the student can be successful. This is key.

More detail about the program and its intricacies can be obtained from Autism Partnership. This submission is to inform the committee how we parents see the school impacting our children and families.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

The terms of reference specifically asks submissions to address the availability and adequacy of services.

Availability

There is no other school like this in Victoria.

No school, other than Moomba Park Primary, delivers student-specific, comprehensive education that uses data-driven Applied Behaviour Analysis designed by a specialist Program Supervisor and delivered by teachers and behavioural therapists working together.

Some of the autistic students at Moomba Park participated in ABA-based early intervention (EI) prior to being of school age. For these students the school offers the opportunity to continue with an approach they are familiar with and the lines between pre-school/EI and school are blurred or seamless. It is the natural progression for these students.

Access to ABA in other schools, including private and independent, must be organised (and often paid for) by families themselves, alternatively families run their ABA program outside school hours. For these students the ABA program may be ad-hoc, inconsistent and lacking the features of a comprehensive quality program. Often parents are willing to provide a behavioural therapist to a school and the principal may be open to the suggestion but are limited by departmental policy.

Parents have mixed success in individually coordinating ABA through their child's school. For some it works very well with all the elements of a quality program in place. Others have struggled with schools agreeing to some components but not others, changing their minds after enrolment or having a different philosophy as to how the child should be included and educated.

ABA providers operate right across Melbourne and some are now based in regional Victoria. They not only work in early intervention but also offer school consultation. They range from private-practice psychologists to large not-for-profit specialists such as Learning for Life and ABACUS. Schools are generally free to allocate their resources as they determine. With the NDIS arriving now is the opportune time for schools to innovate and

make ABA a real option for more children, not just those who are able to enrol at Moomba Park Primary.

For students at Moomba Park Primary who have not had access to ABA or possibly other forms of EI the school offers the opportunity to be taught in the way they can learn by breaking tasks down, reinforcing success and fading prompts and supports. Importantly, it enables the informing of parents of the behavioural strategies used to enable a consistent approach between school and home.

Some parents travel great distances to take their children to this school. Some families have relocated – moved their families from outer suburbs and from regional Victoria to Melbourne. This potentially impacts their access to family and community supports, but also opens them to a fully inclusive school with a diverse student body and a concentration of students with autism spectrum disorder so the family and student are in no way the “odd one out”.

Many of our families have experiences with other schools, both specialist and mainstream. These families make the informed choice to travel to Moomba Park Primary.

The school itself takes a constant stream of enrolment enquiries for autistic children from across Victoria and interstate. This program is in demand!

Adequacy

Teachers at Moomba Park Primary are not just trained in autism and behaviour intervention. Their teaching is observed by the specialist ABA Program Supervisor and they are coached in their practice. This builds teacher capability across the school, a key goal of the Education Department’s Special Needs Plan. The coaching is not restricted to outcomes for the autistic student but to the whole student body. Inclusive practices are beneficial to all students. Any student with behaviours of concern (challenging behaviours) will benefit from behaviour intervention using ABA. Any student with learning difficulties will benefit from the suite of skill-building strategies used within ABA.

We parents are very clear and specific in what we know is best for our children. Some families have tried and failed at other schools. To them the difference is clear; they have experienced either ASD-specific schools or other mainstream schools where there may be

a teacher-aide and a teacher who has a good heart but who misinterprets their child's behaviour. Expectations may have been set low. A culture of accommodation arose where 'so long as the student is not hurting or irritating anyone' was seen as success.

To optimise independence there is a focus on learning-to-learn skills. These skills are often difficult for autistic children to master and include sustained attention, waiting, learning from social cues and working independently. Where lacking, these skills are taught explicitly.

Data informs the teacher and Program Supervisor in extending the student. We feel our children are set challenges they wouldn't be at other schools due to different educational techniques and staff limitations (training or time constraints). Our children are pushed to be their best both behaviourally and academically.

Improving speech and communication is another strength of the school. Previously non-verbal children are now speaking to express their needs and wants (which reduces frustration and associated behaviours), communicating with peers and yet advancing academically. Program design builds in opportunity for repetitive practice of communication targets.

By utilising ABA techniques the school is able to reduce the incidents of challenging behaviour and ensure students are kept safe and the classroom is not disrupted. This is in stark contrast to media reports of students being restrained in other schools. It also reduces the stigmatisation for the student and removes a barrier to social interaction and the establishment of friendships.

It is well known that challenging behaviours can present in unique ways in children on the autism spectrum. Rigidity, self-stimulatory behaviours and emotional regulation can present huge limitations for autistic students, particularly in a mainstream school. More than positive behaviour supports an ABA program digs deeper into these features.

To optimise inclusion the school plans for it. Our children attend camps, go on excursions and participate in cultural activities. Where challenges present for students limiting aspects are identified and worked on prior to the event.

The school works hard to match students who work well together. In other schools students have been placed together just because they are 'the two integration kids',

regardless of their differing personalities and educational needs. At Moomba Park there are approximately two autistic students in each classroom. This volume of autistic students means that good matches for classwork and social connection can be made. Our children benefit from being educated in a mainstream environment but there are other students who are 'like them' and who face similar challenges.

Conclusion

The ABA program at Moomba Park Primary School is enabling our children to fulfil their potential by the setting of high expectations. Our teachers work hard, and they work effectively because they are supported by quality training, coaching and importantly data which informs the delivery of their educational program.

Above all, families want **options** in educational settings. Our children are not set in stone and we need to know that there are options available. Our children need more than to be welcomed by a school (though many families do not even have this). They need to be educated, challenged and have high expectations held for them.

The implementation of Applied Behaviour Analysis does this for our children. As a group we want this to be available to other Victorian families. Start small; establish programs in Melbourne's east, south-east and west. Make use of technology and trial ABA by distance in regional schools. Give schools and families the option.

Members of our group of parents would be happy to address the committee.

Regards

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Janine Drennan

On behalf of the Moomba Park Autism Inclusion Parents.