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Subject PARLIMENTARY SUBMISSION ON AUTISM IN EDUCATION

The following submission has been prepared by members of the Yellow Ladybugs, an advocacy group supporting the needs for girls with Autism who attend mainstream school. We request to present our submission in person, and would welcome the opportunity to speak at the hearing. Our submission is broken into individual comments from our members, and finishes with an official submission from Yellow Ladybugs

Individual comments:

Many people still have the misconception that Autism predominantly affects males. Researchers are finally highlighting the differences between males and females and why females commonly go under the radar or are diagnosed much later in life, but as a community, we are failing girls with Autism. Girls are often misdiagnosed, misunderstood or missed completely. The negative impacts caused by this, are life long, and come at not only a personal cost to our girls, but to the family, and our community as a whole. We need to invest in programs which address these issues, so that girls and women can get a timely, affordable diagnosis, the correct support in therapy, school and work. Often girls with Autism, who are attending mainstream school, do not have access to any funding, because their language score is above 70. Their needs may be hard to pick up on, and 'invisible' so they miss out on critical support. Yellow Ladybugs is a volunteer program, dedicated to bringing these issues to the forefront, so we can begin to reduce the negative impacts caused by delayed diagnosis, and lack of support. It is imperative that volunteer programs such as ours, is supported and integrated in the wider Autism support framework.

Katie Koullas, Founder, Yellow Ladybugs

Social group therapy is dominated by boys yet the challenges and interventions required for girls are very different. Specific groups for girls would be wonderful.

As to school, the cut off for a funded aid is a significant disadvantage for girls who have the vocabulary but

Every girl deserves to *Party* Every girl deserves to *Smile*
Every girl deserves to *Be included* Every girl deserves to *Dream*

deficits in so many other areas. Chloe scored 103 on the language test but boy is she struggling in the classroom.

Katie G – Mum of Chloe

I had to pull my daughter out of public school and put her in Catholic (despite being an atheist) because she didn't qualify for an aide. She's entitled to one under the Catholic system. Girls often present with much better vocab and communication skills so their learning issues are masked. My daughter's teacher kept saying she was 'exactly where she should be' academically. At the end of Grade 3 however, it became increasingly apparent that this wasn't the case. She tested in the 5th percentile for maths and the 12th for English. She was in the 97th percentile for vocabulary. In other words, she's brilliant at making the teachers think she understands what's happening in the classroom. She's a chameleon.

Michelle P, Yellow Ladybugs Member

ASD girls are continually overlooked in Australian Government schools. There is very little teacher training and the girls are so often overlooked as their symptoms are so different to boys. In the meantime girls struggle socially and often the victims of bullying and rarely have their social, emotional or learning needs met. Statistically at least one or two girls per classroom have ASD, but because they appear to be otherwise 'functional' they are not given support or recognition.

Sheridan J, Yellow Ladybugs Member

That the language cut off for funding disadvantages girls. My daughter scored 71 after years of intensive therapy and being refused funding at first (we fought and won) felt almost like we were being punished for our hard work and investment.

Also that if girls are put in speech therapy or social skills groups at school odds are that they will be the only girl in the group. My daughter likes boys and plays with them well, but she's getting a bit sick of pirate ships and lego building (with no pretend play afterwards). I'd like her to learn skills with girls and boys. There are issues for girls right across the spectrum. The very high functioning girls tend to get missed, the ones in the middle don't get as good a deal as the boys and I hope the state enquiry gets some female specific feedback from specialist schools too

Natasha E, Yellow Ladybugs Member

Funding for schools doesn't remotely take into account individual child's needs. It is too much "one size fits all"... children struggle in different areas and there is no consideration for that. Children are not cookie cut outs! One size doesn't fit all. I think mainstream schools are trying to do the best they can with little resources or funding to be able to do it well. and so all children come off second best for it...

Kee H, Yellow Ladybugs Member

A comment from her teacher was "I can't treat her any different I have to treat her the same as there are other children with more visible needs". Just because hers is not physically obvious does not mean she isn't impaired.

Jessica D, Yellow Ladybugs Member

We had comments from school such as 'We'll just have to see how she goes in mainstream school' ...there is no choice if IQ is above a certain level. Also, 'We don't feel we have transitioned her well'... after 1 term of prep.

Susan Z, Yellow Ladybugs Member

She seems too social and empathetic to be on the spectrum" my daughters 'special interest' is copying and imitating what older girls say and how they act.... She is a Chameleon and it is exhausting for her.

Tess J, Yellow Ladybugs Member

It's so hard it to identify autism in girls. My six-year-old son Nathan was diagnosed with ASD relatively quickly. But that was not the case for my eight-year-old daughter Emma. With Emma, we noticed from a young age the symptoms were there, just not as intense, every time we approached a professional to talk about it, it was always dismissed as she's just shy. Or she'll be fine." Emma had repetitive behaviours and an overwhelming fear of people. She was eventually diagnosed with ASD, but much later and missed out on a lot of critical early intervention support.

Natalie G, Yellow Ladybugs Secretary

Penny Robinson, Yellow Ladybugs and I CAN Network Ambassador, says "When I was diagnosed with Aspergers Syndrome in Year 9, over 18 years ago, I didn't meet anyone like me - female or male - until almost 5 years later, when I started uni.". This needs to change.

Group Submission: The following submission has been developed on behalf of Yellow Ladybugs from member Tammy Moar.

The recent review led by former Disability Discrimination Commissioner Graeme Innes in Victoria of a program for disabled students has highlighted a system that is failing students with disabilities, particularly those enrolled in mainstream schools. The Andrew's government accepted 21 out of 25 recommendations made, however failed to adopt four of the key recommendations pertaining to a new 'needs-based' funding model. Whilst the boost will contribute towards school transitions programmes, teacher training and greater numbers of speech pathologists still remains drastically inadequate, fiscally and strategically, in meeting the current level of need when on average 19% of students have some sort of learning impairment.

Students on the Autism Spectrum are one of the key groups most at risk. There is a lack of a culture of inclusion across both primary and secondary levels of the school system. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 86 per cent of students on the Autism Spectrum are reported as facing "difficulty" at school. (Varney, C, 2015). Students with diagnosed High-Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder (HF ASD) are more often than not eligible for funding under current funding models for ASD or behaviour. By definition, 'HF ASD' means an absence of an Intellectual Disability (ID) or significant speech impairment. These are precisely the requirements needed to received funding under the current funding model for ASD. Never the less, 'high-functioning' or not, many still have significant needs for support in the classroom and school environment and without support many of these students are still failing to access the curriculum. "Hundreds of Victorian students are starting high school each year without support because the system fails to recognise their problems as serious enough" (Gordon, J 2016, *The Age*). Unfortunately, assessment is based on factors (IQ and level of general speech) which are not sole determinants of school success. Regardless of often having an average to about average IQ, these students face such challenges such as social communication difficulties, sensory integration, pragmatic speech and executive functioning problems.

Whilst some children with HF ASD may have co-morbidities (such as anxiety, OCD, ADHD) that may manifest themselves in problematic behaviours that may mean that they are eligible for funding via other means such 'behaviour', many do not. Many children with HF ASD do not present with problematic behaviours at school, but rather withdraw when they are not coping. Girls on the spectrum typically fall into this category. They are a group at high risk of being failed by the education system. The research and anecdotal evidence both clearly show that teachers are often unaware of the typical female presentation and they very often present as quiet and withdrawn, masking their need for support and therefore do not attract the help that they so desperately need. There are countless stories from parents of having to remove their daughters with ASD from the mainstream school system as they aren't understood or accommodated.

Subsequently, despite their relative strengths, students with HF ASDs should not be regarded as having a mild disorder that requires only minimal educational support. Despite being average to above average intelligence, students with HF ASD are statistically more likely to underachieve due to difficulty interpreting the world around them. This is particularly true from a social perspective, being in a social environment such as school where social demands are high can be a cause of great stress and anxiety (Lawson 1988 cited in Moyse R 2015). This anxiety impacts directly on the ability to learn as stress causes impairment in cognition.

In a study of girls with HF ASD in a number of mainstream primary schools, four key areas were identified as creating difficulties, class rules; working collaboratively; completing tasks; and other interactions with peers (Moyse R 2015). This correlates with areas typically reported as difficult for children with ASD with significant impairments in the areas of executive functioning, difficulty in beginning and completing tasks on time, slower processing speeds, along with rigid and inflexible thinking (Attwood 2007; Garnett et al 2013 cited in Moyse R 2015). These difficulties are exacerbated by social communication and sensory integration problems previously mentioned which are magnified in the school setting. Hence the chronic failure of the school system to cater for those HF ASD students who are assessed purely on the basis of IQ and expressive speech. Difficulty in these areas creates a significant impediment to learning and they are unable to access the curriculum in the same way as their peers. 'Functioning' for those on the Autism Spectrum is also dynamic. It can change daily, depending on a variety of factors. They may be deemed 'high-functioning' in selected areas or on a particular day or setting, but at times may be debilitated and essentially void their strengths. When their strengths are recognised and supported they will thrive.

In addition to the funding for students, another significant and recurrent problem is the lack of training for teachers in the mainstream system for the inclusion of students with additional needs. Whilst in the latest recommendations an increase to funding for teacher training was included, it is far from adequate in meeting the current level of need. Staff should be professionally supported so that they are confident in meeting an increasingly diverse pupil population in a positive way.

Furthermore, the inconsistencies across schools is problematic...two students with the same disability and the same emotional needs in different schools will not necessarily receive the same level of support, therefore parents are forced to 'shop around' to find a suitable school, many without the expertise to do so. Many parents are well supported through early intervention services prior to school entry, however all this support stops dramatically at school entry. This should not be the case, continued support of the child should exist throughout their educational life.

These children do not have the option to access specialised educational settings due to their 'High-Functioning' presentation therefore the government has a responsibility to ensure that the 'inclusive' schools that they are promising to create are more than a tokenistic reaction to the shift in societies values towards a more inclusive community. It is not enough to base inclusion of

students with special needs on the premise of human rights. How to achieve this in an educational setting in a practical way needs to be carefully considered. If these settings are what are being promoted by government then the government needs to put the required supports in place for this to be achieved rather than teachers having to struggle to provide and accommodate students with a vast array of needs in their classrooms without the extra resources required.

A realistic funding model for special education, based on real-world data on the costs of meeting the needs of this one-fifth of our student population needs to be established to support authentic and full inclusion. Funding for students with disabilities has been put into the 'too hard basket' including in the Gonski review. This is unacceptable and makes Australia a mockery. David Gonski simply gave up on funding for special education, admitting that he could not determine an appropriate weighting for students with disabilities in the formulas he devised. Furthermore, no constructive recommendations were made as to how best to address and rectify the gaps and shortcomings in special education in Australia. Key stakeholders on the front line must be consulted, including parents, students, school administrators and teachers.

In summary, school is the primary form of socialization for children aged between 4 and 18. The current focus on generic educational outcomes that do not recognize the varied needs of learners fails to see the importance of school as a holistic experience. School has a crucial role in demonstrating inclusion of students in the school setting and is reflective of the student's potential inclusion in society upon leaving school. The more inclusive schools are of students, the greater potential for independent living post school and less reliance on governmental supports.

These children have average to above average IQ's yet this should not be the sole basis for eligibility for funding, learning is dependant on many other factors which is why these children are underachieving. They are capable of learning, they are capable of contributing, they are capable of social interaction, but they need greater and different supports to their peers and these supports are not being provided due to chronic systemic failures.

Every child should feel safe, have friends and feel valued. They should have the highest attainable expectations set for them. Parents should feel confident that the school and community will welcome their children and celebrate their uniqueness but also accept that there may be challenges along the way. Unfortunately, this is not the current educational experience for students with special needs, including students on the Autism Spectrum and it must change.

Moyse, R, Porter, J 2015 'The experience of the hidden curriculum for autistic girls at mainstream primary schools', *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 30:2, 187-201

<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2014.986915>>

Varney, C 2015, 'Education system failing students with autism' *The Age*, 7 April, 2015, date retrieved 28 March, 2016, <<http://www.theage.com.au/comment/education-system-failing-students-with-autism-20150405-1mezfn.html#ixzz44A95ZjBt>>

Yellow Ladybugs YouTube videos:

To my daughter's teacher: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wppXwn-WsPw>

General Awareness: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUFEzcatXOs>