

## VPA Position Paper

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### Autism Spectrum Disorder

The Victorian Principals Association (VPA) is concerned about the increase in the number of students who exhibit autistic tendencies in government primary schools and the lack of appropriate support for these students to assist in their learning.

#### **Purpose**

The VPA seeks to secure adequate funding and resources in order to develop a 21<sup>st</sup> Century approach in educating the increasing number of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders in our schools.

#### **Background to the VPA Position**

The VPA position has been determined in the following context:

- The outdated DEECD guidelines for assessment of Autism Spectrum Disorder were last updated six years ago in 2004.
- The educational system has seriously underestimated the number of children with Autism - an alarming new U.S statistic indicates that Autism is now diagnosed in one out of every 91 children, instead of one out of every 150 children as previously thought.
- The increase in Autism diagnosis presents a significant challenge and strain for the school system, which already faces limited resources in educating children with the neurological condition.
- As the number of school-age children diagnosed with Autism continues to rise at an alarming rate, parents and special-education teachers are trying desperately to make DEECD aware of the often overlooked education needs and costs associated with the condition.
- The current resourcing level of schools provides insufficient capacity to meet the full needs of Autistic students.
- At present, students with an ASD need to exhibit a score of two or more standard deviations below the mean for the student's age in expressive and receptive language skills to access PSD funding.
- Students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder may not meet this limited language criteria. However, they may experience significant deficits in pragmatic skills deeply affecting their ability to engage in meaningful conversation. Under the current Guidelines, these students are ineligible for support under the Program for Students with Disabilities and are not assessed for pragmatic skills.
- Autism is a spectrum disorder that affects individuals differently and to different extents so one particular therapy or treatment will not work the same for all children with Autism.
- Many children with Autism have incredible memories or skills in a narrow spectrum and we should seek to assist them to harness these skills so that they can be used to enhance or broaden their general learning.
- Many children with Autism also have deficits that generally relate to social interactions. These deficits require a targeted approach that aims to gradually improve social skills that will enhance the child's ability to fully participate in society.
- Given the explosive growth in the number of children exhibiting Autistic behaviours, the fact that no two cases are alike, and the resulting strain this puts on the education system, experts are warning school stakeholders to prepare now for what could be a flood of challenges in the coming years
- Expectations, the use of data and the targeted use of resources will drive improvement.

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## VPA Position

- Victorian government primary schools need government support in providing adequate funding to support children with Autism so each child is given the opportunity to reach his/her full potential.
- Schools need access to a variety of resources providing them the flexibility to use evidence based approaches to deploy individualised programs.
- The General Criteria for Autism Spectrum Disorders needs to be updated to include a component measuring pragmatic skills in the eligibility assessment for PSD funding. Hence, the criteria would cater for children who experience significant pragmatic skill deficits but do not meet the current (limited) language criterion

Nb. Pragmatic skills need to be assessed by a speech pathologist using their professional judgement and a range of tests (e.g. TOPL, CELF-4).

- Students with an ASD exhibit a score of one point five or more standard deviations below the mean for the student's age in expressive and receptive language skills to access PSD funding.
- The DEECD guidelines for assessment of Autism Spectrum Disorder must be updated so that they are relevant, acknowledge new findings and recognise the rapid increase in Autism diagnosis in recent years.
- Schools require more Autism specific trained staff to help in educating and supporting Autistic students.
- General-education teachers need to be equipped with the tools to adequately deal with Autistic students in the classroom. Such staff require expert training and the time to manage the complex demands such students present in order to meet their needs.
- A 21<sup>st</sup> Century response to educating students with Autism must be developed and schools provided with the necessary resources to support children with the disorder.
- Early intervention programs and technological resources should be readily available to schools, as both have led to significant gains in the communication and social skills of students with Autism.

The VPA *Autism Spectrum Disorder* position paper was initiated by VPA Council Members March 2010. Further work on this document was undertaken by VPA Board, President, Principals and Executive Officer.